銃皇無尽のファフニール

プリズマティック・ガーデン

XI

ツカサ
Illustration
梱枝りこ

講談社ラノベ文庫

銃皇無尽のファフニール

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XI

ツカサ

Illustration

梱枝りこ

だがジャンヌは急に押し黙り、
スカートの裾を押さえたまま
後ろを向いた。

「お尻……ですか。
わ、分かりました」

ふるふると震えながら
お尻を突き出すジャンヌを見て、
頭の中が真っ白になる。

「ち、違う！
俺はそういうつもりじゃ――」

ジャンヌ・オルテンシア
Jeanne Hortensia

レンの頬はぷにぷにと柔らかく、
弾力もあり、
想像以上の気持ちよさがあった。
「おお……」
夢中になってつついていると、
レンの頬は次第に赤くなってくる。
摩擦のせいではなく、
レンの顔が紅潮しているのだ。
「お、お兄ちゃん……
いつまで、するの？」
レン・ミヤザワ
Ren Miyazawa

大胆な水着姿のキーリは、
不機嫌そうなヴリトラの手を引っ張っている。
ヴリトラがむくれているのは、
胸に〝ヴリトラ〟と書かれた
スクール水着を着ているからだろう。
状況から見て、キーリが悪ノリしたに違いない。
ヴリトラ
Vritra
キーリ・スルト・ムスペルヘイム
Kili Surtr Muspellzheimr

銃皇無尽のファフニール

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Prologue

The black dragon—"Black" Vritra.

Currently appearing in the form of a young girl, she was very aware of her incomplete existence.

—How powerless I am.

This thought occupied her mind the whole time.

Having acquired an authority, thereby proudly evolved into a spiritual lifeform on a higher dimension, she would be an existence akin to God from the perspective of humans.

However, value systems were often relative.

Vritra frequently compared herself with her "past self."

It was not her but her past self that most closely approached the human concept of "God."

The power to create life and matter freely, universal love for everything on this world of Gaia, fair and just at all times—Spirituality of such nobility was impossible for Vritra to conceive in her current state.

Indeed, even though her memories had been preserved as information, the continuity of self had been broken.

Hence, there was much that she did not understand.

Her past self had put her own body on the line in order to restore this world that had been destroyed by the seventh calamity.

But why go to such lengths? Was it because she felt an obligation? Right now, she could not comprehend it at all.

Even if it was the sense of mission or instinct as a counterdragon, there was also the matter of wanting to do so. Choosing the approach of restoration meant consuming an amount of dark matter that would jeopardize her continued existence. Her current self would never choose the option of self-sacrifice.

Even though that was the case, why?

No matter how many times she asked herself, she could not find the answer. But this time, she became aware of her own insignificance.

If her past self was a great river, then she was currently a small stream at most.

Her dark matter was neither sufficient for restoring the world nor creating life.

Hence... Taking into account the understanding of her powerlessness, she began to ponder.

Methods to oppose the imminent ninth calamity.

The goal was to prevent her past self's efforts from going to waste. Also, more importantly, her own continued survival—

However, the plan she devised had ended in complete failure.

Although interference from Yggdrasil, who was seeking self-preservation at all costs, played a key role, what had decisively foiled her plan was a single human. This human treated others with unwarranted familiarity, displayed ruthlessness in certain areas despite overwhelming naivete, the kind of person who would promise to solve everything in the end even without you asking—This was the young man named Mononobe Yuu.

Initially, she had simply labeled him as the "Irregular," but then discovered the undeniable result that he was the ninth counterdragon.

Furthermore, she had discovered another "fact."

That had taken place on the clock tower's top floor, in Charlotte B. Lord's private room.

Although a great commotion was taking place in the bathroom, Vritra was uninterested. Sitting on the sofa, she was reading manga and a sorted selection of books brought by Firill Crest.

Though the vine around her neck interfered with dark matter conversion, her arms and legs were no longer restrained.

No longer needing to ask others to turn the pages for her, it felt quite liberating. To be teased while looked after by her daughter Kili, that was quite an unwilling situation for her.

"Hmph... How infuriating."

Frowning at the lack of progress in the relationship between the protagonist and the heroine, Vritra murmured.

Manga was a human creation packed with a high density of information. She found manga more attractive than novels or television. The pictures and dialogue produced by human thought were definitely impossible to create through the transmutation of matter.

However—Just as she finished one volume of manga and was reaching out for the next, she noticed.

A girl was crouching down in the balcony outside the window.

She was Mononobe Mitsuki, the younger sister of Mononobe Yuu.

Watching Mononobe Mitsuki holding the back of her neck in pain, Vritra felt chilled by the emotions surging from the depths of body.

Vritra recalled how Mononobe Yuu had almost killed her. At the time—He had directed genuine killing intent at her, extremely angry at her for harming Mononobe Mitsuki. Understanding that his possession of the scrapped authority enabled him to kill her in her human form, Vritra had felt fear.

In other words, this was fear originating from a crisis of life and death.

Relaxing her grip and moving away from the back of her neck, Mononobe Mitsuki's hand showed a wavering outline—Starting from the fingertips, black "darkness" covered it.

Seeing this situation, Mononobe Mitsuki cried out in surprise, but Vritra was far more shaken than she was.

Vritra instantly stood up from the sofa and hastened over to the balcony.

Countless images became linked together in her mind.

"I see—So this is the situation. Now 'tis finally clear to me."

"...Vritra?"

Noticing Vritra, who had stopped at the entrance to the balcony, Mitsuki looked up. The change affecting her body had already subsided.

Nevertheless... Beyond a doubt, that "darkness" was what Vritra feared the most.

With this, the probability of Mononobe Yuu being the ninth counterdragon had increased infinitely.

"Previously, when I attempted to harm thee, that person expressed unusual rage. That was probably an instinctive act as Neun. As the ninth counterdragon, that person already knew what he should be doing."

The excitement of answered question and the tension of standing before a mortal enemy shook Vritra's heart, causing her to deliver her words in a stiff voice.

"What are you talking about...? Are you speaking of Nii-san?"

Meanwhile, Mitsuki asked in confusion.

Seeing Mononobe completely unaware of her own position, Vritra was overcome with intense irritation.

Hence, she voiced her speculation with hostility.

"Indeed—That person is protecting thee in order to obey a counterdragon's instinct. 'Tis because the ninth calamity, which shall bring destruction to the world, *is within you*."

"Eh……?"

Mononobe Mitsuki froze after leaking out a quiet voice of questioning.

Vritra did not know what she was thinking or had understood.

However—the effect Vritra's words had on her was far stronger than even Vritra expected.

Mononobe Mitsuki's expression froze, her pupils contracted forcefully while her body started trembling from the extremities.

—Curses, was it too great a shock?

Vritra regretted allowing her own feelings to drive her into cornering Mononobe Mitsuki... However, time could not be rewound.

If only I had not allowed myself to be ruled by emotion...

Vritra scolded herself in anguish at the thought of her mistake.

Compared to her former godlike existence, this was utterly ridiculous.

Vritra concluded she should summon Mononobe Yuu who was Neun. However, before she could take action, Mononobe Mitsuki's condition changed again.

The trembling in her limbs swifly subsided. The fear and surprise on her face vanished. She spaced out, looking to the sky.

"—Hey?"

When Vritra called out in trepidation, Mononobe Mitsuki looked at her in puzzlement.

"Umm... Is something the matter?"

It sounded like she was unaware of the situation. Vritra felt confused.

"What happened...? Thou... dost not remember?"

"Remember...? What?"

Mitsuki tilted her head and asked with honest ignorance.

"Nay—I am mistaken. Thou needst not pay it any mind."

Vritra shook her head and returned to the room from the balcony. Mononobe Mitsuki watched in surprise to see Vritra off.

"—What happened? Be that as it may... I must not provoke her any further."

Sitting on the sofa, glancing sideways at Mitsuki in the balcony, Vritra sighed.

Everything was so incomprehensible. Furthermore, these matters were impossible for her to handle in her current state.

Memory erasure—Or perhaps, the rejection of change?

It was possible that this was derived from Neun's authority.

Even after using Hraesvelgr's authority, Mononobe Yuu could still turn back into human.

Supposing change would not bring about a bad outcome, then she should not take action recklessly. Informing Mononobe Yuu of her speculations necessitated proper timing.

There is no problem if "that" can be suppressed given the current state of affairs. The ideal course of action is to observe Mononobe Mitsuki's condition for the time being, only making a move when the situation deteriorates. Here on, I must investigate how the current situation came to be.

After deep contemplation, Vritra reached this conclusion.

Information gathering ought to begin with Mononobe Mitsuki's brother, Mononobe Yuu. It was necessary to get close to him, even if for nothing else but to elucidate Neun's powers thoroughly.

However, this raised an issue.

Vritra looked towards the bathroom where the commotion was still ongoing.

There was never a moment's peace around Mononobe Yuu. She had to create a chance for a confidential discussion.

—Furthermore, he probably does not trust me. If I talk to him without explaining the situation clearly, he would probably maintain silence out of wariness.

Arms crossed, stuck in a conundrum, Vritra settled her gaze upon the manga she had just been reading.

It was typical shoujo manga fare. In other words, a manga depicting the process of how a love-stricken girl got to know the boy of her affections, open their hearts to each other, and prevail against romantic rivals.

"Mayhap this could be used for reference..."

Murmuring quietly, Vritra reached for the pile of manga.

Chapter 01 – Room Wars of Chaos

Part 1

"Ohhh... My friend, young maidens... Do you truly intend to leave me behind...?"

Reaching out with trembling arms and a pallid demeanor, the petite blue-eyed blonde pleaded hoarsely.

At first glance, one might think she was younger than us students; however, she—Charlotte B. Lord—was actually Midgard's chief administrator.

As the principal, she occupied the clock tower's top floor with her office and private room. Along with a couple others, we members of Brynhildr Class had been hiding here the whole time until the situation settled down outside.

"We won't forget you... Principal."

The silver-haired girl, Iris Freyja, tearfully bid her goodbye.

"Tia... had a very happy time... We made wonderful memories."

The young girl with little red horns on her head, Tia Lightning, had her eyes completely wet.

"Thank you for your hospitality."

My younger sister, Mononobe Mitsuki, bowed deeply and thanked her.

"This sure brings back a lot of memories for me—It's like having a huge family. Ren, you had a good time too, right?"

Ariella Lu smiled happily. The red-haired girl next to her, Ren Miyazawa, spoke next:

"Mm... Staying up late with everyone was not bad."

Nodding, Ren seemed a little reluctant to leave.

However, the rest of us all showed a mixture of relief and exhaustion on our faces.

"Finally, we can get back to a life of routine."

Tossing her long blonde hair with her hand, Lisa Highwalker sighed.

"Yes... Although living together is fun, not having any private time is a bit tiring."

Firill Crest agreed with Lisa. She looked very sleepy and was rubbing her eyes.

"Though I have no right to complain—I believe this kind of lifestyle will lead to one's decline if continued. More importantly, it's a bad influence for Zwei's education."

The cross-dressing girl speaking in upright posture was Jeanne Hortensia. Since she was borrowing my school uniform, the sleeves were slightly long.

"bAd inFlUenCE... What does ThAt mEAn?"

The youngest of the group, the purple-haired girl Shion Zwei Shinomiya, tilted her head in puzzlement.

Next to her, Kili Surtr Muspelheim smiled with delight and said:

"I am greatly in favor of leaving this place too. It's hard to make nocturnal visits with so many people living together."

Hearing that, Jeanne explained to Shion that "bad influence refers to imitating people like her," causing Kili to grumble "how rude" to Jeanne.

"Noise is not to my liking either."

Next, the girl who looked like a smaller version of Kili—Vritra who was currently in human form—murmured.

Smiling wryly at everyone, I—Mononobe Yuu—extended my hand towards Charlotte.

"Thanks for looking after us, Charl."

Charlotte proceeded to grab my hand, looking like she was about to break into tears.

"P-Please... Don't go. If you're not here, who's going to stay up all night to play games with me—Owwwww!?"

However, Charlotte's head was pushed down before she could finish. This was the doing of her secretary standing behind her, Mica-san.

"Please do not be selfish, Charlotte-sama. NIFL has withdrawn and Midgardsormr has been repaired. There is no reason to keep everyone here any longer."

Dressed in a maid uniform, the statuesque and busty Mica-san glared at Charlotte.

"B-But I still have to supervise my friend—"

"Subjecting Mononobe-san to house arrest was to prevent him from coming into contact with those whose dragon marks had changed color. However, now that all of them have chosen to touch him, the color changes in the dragon marks have stopped. And right now, none of the other students have shown signs of their dragon marks changing color. Hence, there should not be any problem allowing him to return to school life. Furthermore, documents pertaining to this incident still require your stamp and signature, Charlotte-sama."

Showing a surprised gaze, Charlotte pouted in a sulk.

"I-It's true that they can return to school life... But there's another issue if I let them go... We still don't know what changes might happen to the young maidens..."

"In light of this issue, all of them, who had been living in the girls dormitories, will officially transfer to live in Mitsuki-san's quarters. Information control would be very difficult if anything happened while they continued living in the girls dormitories."

After saying that, Mica-san looked at me.

"Furthermore, Mononobe-san, please refrain from coming into contact with girls from other classes. In the event that you were to cause their dragon marks to change color—We would need to quarantine you again."

"—I-I understand."

I could not help but gulp in the face of Mica-san's pressure and nodded firmly. This is something I had been warned many times in detail already.

"No problem. I will make sure to keep Nii-san under my watchful eyes."

Mitsuki took a step forward and hugged my arm. Although the soft sensation against my elbow was making me flustered, Mitsuki did not seem to mind. After the transformation into my kind, we seem to have grown closer.

Seeing this situation, Iris frantically raised her hand.

"I will watch Mononobe carefully to prevent affairs!"

"Affairs..."

I was troubled already but even more dangerous comments could be heard.

"If any girl dares make a move on my Yuu, I will have her body remember the consequences. Fufu... I wonder which move should I use?"

Kili smiled coldly but Lisa immediately issued a stern warning.

"He is not yours, Kili-san. Should you dare to do anything inappropriate, you would be the one placed in isolation, understood?"

"Isolation... Do you seriously think you can deprive me of my freedom?"

Kili glared back at Lisa with a fearless expression. At that moment, Firill interjected.

"There there... You have to listen to Lisa carefully. What she said just now was out of concern for you, so please interpret it as her slowly warming up to you, Kili-chan."

Hearing that, both Lisa and Kili went red and cried out at the same time.

"Please don't add weird interpretations!"

"Don't you start calling me Kili-chan too!"

The tense atmosphere immediately turned inconclusive. Mica-san smiled wryly.

"I apologize for imposing such trouble upon you. I shall lend my assistance in the dorm moving process too."

"Definitely, moving everything will be quite a huge task—Well, I have very few belongings so I don't mind..."

Ariella glanced suggestively at Firill.

"Mm... Firill will probably need to work a hundred times harder than us."

Ren concurred. She was looking at Firill with eyes filled with pity.

"Firill's room is all books! Piled up to the ceiling!"

Tia spread her hands in a forceful gesture to indicate the vastness of Firill's book collection.

With everyone staring at her, Firill scratched her cheek while breaking out in cold sweat.

"W-Well... Bridges will be crossed when encountered."

Then she slowly approached me and placed her hand on my shoulder.

"...Mononobe-kun, I'm looking forward to your contribution."

"You're going to have me take care of it!"

Although I already expected it, I still exclaimed loudly in protest, extremely exasperated.

Despite having just survived an intense battle , it looked like my body was going to be conscripted for labor again.

Hopefully, I won't end up with muscle pain, I braced myself in resignation.

Part 2

"Phew..."

Looking up at the blue sky with scattered white clouds, I sighed.

Today the sky was clear with a very bright sun, but I avoided direct sunlight by staying in the shade of a fire escape staircase.

Although not as comfortable as being in an air-conditioned room, the breeze from the shore could still blow away the heat.

"How peaceful..."

Listening to unseen birds, I muttered poignantly.

Ever since NIFL imposed that inspection on Midgard—which could actually be called a war between the two sides—four days had passed since that major incident.

Although the landed NIFL troops withdrew after retrieving their destroyed unmanned weaponry, clear signs of battle still lingered everywhere.

But even so, Midgard had returned to peace. Compared to the time when Hekatonkheir attacked the island, things had calmed down much faster.

This was probably because the enemies were human this time, coupled with the fact that Midgard had not suffered any casualties.

Although I did not know what kind of aftermath handling and diplomatic activities Charlotte had to do specifically, the various superpowers apparently withdrew their demands to have Charlotte exert full control over human society using her authority.

Consequently, NIFL no longer had any urgency to take out Charlotte and they generously accepted Midgard's demands.

Midgard's demands mainly included compensation for the monetary damage incurred by NIFL's attack. Apart from that, there was the cessation of satellite monitoring too.

The eye in space looking down upon us from the sky should have changed its orbit already to watch a different scene.

"Oh—! Mononobe, so there you are!"

While I was looking out at the sky, I heard a voice from the landing above.

I looked up to see Iris staring down at me, slightly displeased.

"Jeez, Mononobe... Firill-chan is looking for you, y'know? Slacking off is not allowed."

Iris scolded me with arms akimbo. However, I already had an excuse prepared.

"I'm not slacking off—This is just taking a break. I did make dozens of trips between the entrance and the second floor already while carrying boxes filled with books."

I waved my exhausted arms and explained the necessity of rest to Iris.

Today, I was granted special permission to enter the girls dormitories. Since morning, I had been helping Firill move house the whole time.

Firill used her room as book storage and apparently lived in Lisa and Tia's room instead... Indeed, Firill's room was not a realm fit for human survival.

Rather than towers, the piles of books reaching the ceiling were more akin to walls that divided the cramped room into squares, turning the room into a labyrinthine space.

Although there were gaps large enough for a single person to pass through, accidentally touching a wall of books could cause a collapse, hence there was no guarantee of safety.

Gingerly as though handling explosives, I first disassembled the walls of books, packed the books into cardboard boxes, then moved them to the dorm entrance. I had done this dozens of times already—So many that I gave up counting.

To me, the only saving grace was that autonomous machines were in charge of transporting belongings from the girls dorm to Mitsuki's place. If I had to make trips to Mitsuki's dorm and back, I doubt even a week would be enough to move everything.

"Sigh... I-Is it that big of a job? It looks like it's still not over yet?"

Iris looked a bit intimidated.

"I think it's almost half done now... I should be finished by sundown or so."

"If you have the time, I'd like your assistance too... But it looks like I should hurry up with my part so that I can help you out instead."

I wanted to tell the wryly smiling Iris "that'd be a great help"—But to be honest, something else had been bothering me the whole time.

Iris was standing on the landing half a floor up—And I was looking up at her. Hence, no matter what, I would see her pale thighs between her skirt and her kneesocks. It seemed like I could even see under her skirt if I were to shift my angle.

"Umm, Iris..."

I felt guilty for staying silent, so I was going to tell Iris that she was currently standing at a bad location.

"What's wrong, Mononobe?"

However, just as Iris inclined her head in puzzlement, a gust of wind blew across the fire escape.

Her uniform skirt puffed out then the hem slowly flipped—

"Hyau!?"

Iris frantically used both hands to hold down her skirt hem. However, the pure white fabric under her skirt had already been imprinted clearly in my eyes.

Surrounded by an embarrassing and silent atmosphere, we stared at each other.

"……Mononobe, you're blushing."

Clutching her skirt hem tightly, Iris spoke quietly.

"No… You're the one who's blushing, Iris."

I was well aware that my face had gone red, but Iris also looked thoroughly red as though she had just taken a hot water bath.

"Did… you see it?"

"Well—Umm, I'm sorry."

Scratching my head, I apologized.

"Umm, you don't need to apologize…"

"…I don't?"

"No—Because it's you, Mononobe."

Seeing Iris nod shyly, I held my breath.

It was possible that my face was now redder than hers. Since it would be very embarrassing if she saw it, I pressed my hand against the side of my mouth.

"Well luckily, at least you're wearing it today."

I made a joke to regain composure. There was one time in the past when Iris had gone to school without remembering to wear panties.

"I-It's not like I forget to wear it every single day!"

Iris answered with a pout. The mood went back to normal—I smiled.

"Saying it like that makes it seem like you frequently forget."

"Ooh… You're so bad, Mononobe. The fact that you peeked at my y'know… I'm going to report it to Mitsuki-chan, got that?"

Blushing red, she stuck out the tip of her tongue and immediately opened the door to enter the building.

"Please let me off the hook."

"Fufu, just kidding. Then I'm going back first."

While Iris waved to me with a smile, I answered "okay."

After seeing Iris of, I looked at the blue sky again. However, as soon as I saw a white cloud, the image of white fabric, imprinted on my retina, resurfaced in my mind, making it impossible for me to calm down.

"—Nothing else I can do. Time to head back too."

I originally wanted to take a longer break, but time was running out if getting things done before evening was the goal.

I went up the steel staircase and returned to the corridor of the second floor of the girls dorm.

My classmates from Brynhildr Class all had their rooms on this level. To observe whether their move was going well, I walked past and glanced at them.

The doors to rooms where the move was in progress were open. Cardboard boxes were piled up by the doors.

Lisa and Tia's room was already cleared out. Neither of them were in the room and were probably moving their belongings at the entrance.

Ariella and Ren were in the process of packing up a desktop computer's central processing unit. Since Ariella had mentioned that she had few belongings, it was probably Ren's.

—Sure enough, the girls with roommates were very fast at moving out.

Things were most likely okay on their end, but Iris roomed on her own.

Since she looked like she wanted help, I was very curious about her progress.

But as soon as I approached Iris' room, I instantly knew there was nothing to worry about.

"—Iris-san, you are too sloppy. Please categorize things properly and label the contents clearly on the outside of the boxes. Otherwise, it will turn into a mess when you unbox them, do you understand?"

"Umm, yes, I understand."

I could hear Mitsuki and Iris' voices from the room. I peered through the ajar door to see Mitsuki issuing directions to Iris.

It looked like she had coming over to help out Iris whose move was going slowly. Initially after making contact with me when her dragon mark was changing blue, Mitsuki had feeling unwell, but she seemed to have recovered now. In that case, I guess I did not need to help Iris.

Although I hoped for assistance with Firill's move, since Jeanne and Kili's presence had not been disclosed to ordinary students yet, I could not ask them to come to the girls dorm to help out.

I went to Firill's room again—Or rather, her book repository.

Adjacent to the door on both sides were a great number of boxes for packing books.

According to Iris, Firill was apparently looking for me. Preparing myself to face her anger, I looked into the room.

However, I was greeted by a scene that was totally off from my expectations.

Things had improved greatly from the maze of books. Standing at the doorway, I was able to see the situation in the room. Firill was sitting squarely in the center of the room, reading a book in her hand.

"Sigh..."

Sighing, I entered the room. Firill looked up at me.

"Oh, Mononobe-kun—Sheesh, where did you go?"

"...I went for a 'self-directed break.'"

"In other words, slacking off, bad guy."

Firill pouted adorably.

Next, I pointed at the paperback in her hand.

"I apologize for that—But all things considered, I'm just here to help, right? You've got to do your part too, Firill."

Firill had been reading the whole time, contributing nothing at all. As a result, my burden was greatly increased.

"Hmm... I did intend to help out properly too, you know? It's just that I somehow got sucked in when I was taking a quick flip through an old book I've read before."

"Fine, you're forbidden from flipping through books during the move."

"No way—"

Firill expressed her discontent.

"Not allowed. I'm helping out voluntarily, so you have to obey my demands too."

I declared with my arms akimbo, but for some reason, Firill looked confused.

"Eh? I did intend to reward you properly, you know?"

"R-Really...?"

Surprised, I asked in response.

Speaking of rewards from Firill, what flashed through my mind was the event on the volcanic island during the punitive expedition against Basilisk. To reward me for clearing up the conflict between Mitsuki and Lisa, Firill had brought Iris and the rest of the girls into the bath while I was using the hot spring.

"Oh, Mononobe-kun... Your face is turning red. Are you looking forward to something?"

Firill looked up at me with an alluring smile.

"Uh, it's not like that—"

"—Go ahead and look forward to it, Mononobe-kun."

When I denied in fluster, Firill interrupted me with a whisper as though telling a secret.

"Uh... What on earth are you planning to do?"

"Fufu, I'm still thinking. Go ahead and tell me if you want anything. I'll do anything no matter what."

With Firill's serious gaze upon me, I could not help but feel my heart pound faster.

"Anything no matter what... I don't think you should make such a promise so lightly, right?"

I used my rationality to drive away my surging delusions and feigned a calm expression while I warned Firill.

"Don't worry. I've already thought it through properly. I said it only because it's for you, Mononobe-kun, so don't worry."

These words unsettled me, causing me to avoid her gaze.

What surfaced in my mind was still the event on the volcanic island. Back then, I was in the hot spring, hugged by Firill in the nude. Recalling that soft and elastic sensation, my thoughts were scattered all over the place.

"E-Even if you say that suddenly..."

"That's why you should give it some thought. But if you don't hurry, I'll decide on my own."

Smiling mischievously, Firill placed the book she was holding into a box. The move resumed again.

"Oh okay..."

I nodded and picked up a cardboard box filled with books.

However, due to the wavering in my heart, I accidentally tripped over some books by my feet.

"Ack—"

I lost balance slightly and my shoulder leaned into a wall. Normally, this would not be a problem, but—The wall I had leaned into was made of books, towering up to the ceiling.

The books above collapsed and came down like an avalanche.

"Woah..."

Shocked, Firill looked up at the falling books.

"Firill!"

I put down the box I was carrying and used my body to shield Firill.

Many books fell on my back. As the weight increased, I could no longer stand and ended up falling towards Firill.

Boing, the instant my face was cushioned by something soft, my vision turned completely black.

Knowing that I was buried by books, I struggled under the heavy weight.

"Mmm..."

Next, I heard a sweet voice nearby for some reason. Due to my movement, the books on top of me fell left and right, lightening the load. Thus, I was able to escape from from the weight. I pushed myself up using my arms.

After I got rid of some books on top of me, a ray of light entered—I found Firill and I gazing into each other's eyes up close.

This posture looked as though I had pinned her down on her back. And where my face had been buried was the valley in her massive bust.

"...Thank you, Mononobe-kun. Another favor I have to return."

Blushing, Firill smiled.

"No, you don't have to. It was my mistake just now... You don't owe me anything."

Conscious of my own face going red, I shook my head stiffly.

"Really? But it's a rare chance—Then I'll first return the favor of helping me put my room in order."

With slight disappointment, Firill wrapped her arms around my neck with a seductive expression.

"...Firill?"

As I looked at her in puzzlement, Firill whispered to me in a sweet voice.

"What would you like to do, Mononobe-kun? If you don't hurry up and tell me, I will give you my treasured present."

Pulled by Firill's arms, I leaned closer in her direction. However, we were not face to face. My head rested on Firill's chest with her uniform ribbon against the tip of my nose.

"Hey, what are you doing—"

"Boys enjoy burying their face between boobs, don't they? I read that from a book before."

"W-What kind of book did you read!?"

When I asked that, Firill looked a little flustered.

"N-Not the dirty type, okay? Just ordinary shounen manga. Don't get the wrong idea."

"...So reading books of that kind is embarrassing."

I smiled wryly. Due to Firill's fluster, I regained my composure a little.

"Because—I do need to maintain a princess' dignity, you know?"

"In that case, doing this would be bad, right?"

I brought up the fact that we were pressed together intimately, but she shook her head.

"This is fine, since you are my prince, Mononobe-kun. By the way... Having selected me, Mononobe-kun, you must show more princely self-awareness. You need to take responsibility properly."

Seeing her serious gaze, I could not help but fall silent.

Although I wanted to retort, that would probably prompt Firill to proceed with an unexpected counterattack.

Changing the color of the girls' dragon marks and turning them into my kind through contact, this was beyond the point of no return. Although it was an emergency situation at the time, what I did was no different from how dragons turned Ds into mates. No longer considered Ds, the girls might not lose their powers even after reaching adulthood. If things really ended up like that, it would become very difficult for them to leave Midgard. It was possible that I had already warped their lives greatly.

"Firill... Umm—"

"You don't intend to take responsibility, Mononobe-kun?"

Seeing Firill a little worried, I shook my head to reassure her.

"No, that's not true. I touched you of my own will, Firill. I will take responsibility for all problems arising from that. I will also do everything within my power."

I asserted strongly and met Firill's gaze squarely. Next, her expression turned gentle as she spoke with a giggle.

"Oh, didn't you warn against lightly claiming you'll do anything?"

"...I'm not saying this lightly either."

"Really? ...Good to know."

Firill looked reassured then hugged my face tightly.

"Mmmph! W-Wait! Although I said I'd do anything, I still haven't sorted out all kinds of circumstances, plus I still need to discuss things properly with everyone—"

Sandwiched between her warm and soft breasts, I spoke hastily. The body warmth transmitted through her uniform and the girly fragrance filling my nose were making me lose my sanity.

Firill then loosened her hug and stroked the hair on the back of my head.

"Very well. Let's conclude here for today."

"...Thanks a lot."

Filled with embarrassment, I lifted my head from Firill's chest.

"However, you might be out of pondering time, you know? Oh, there's a bump there."

Firill warned while stroking my head. The bump was probably caused by a falling book. It was slightly painful to the touch.

"What do you mean by out of time—"

"...Resolution will not wait for you. Although straightening out this room is a lot of work... True trouble will come afterwards."

Firill cocked her head with a mixture of worry and anticipation.

"Afterwards?"

"Yes, Mononobe-kun. You are about to face an important choice. However, this burden might be a bit heavy for you right now... I will be assisting you. Rest assured."

Although Firill spoke with confidence, I still felt uneasy.

"What kind of choice?"

"—Secret. Revealing it now would be unfair. However... You'll understand if you give it a little thought."

Firill only gave me a cryptic answer.

In the end, no matter how I asked after that, Firill refused to give a clear answer. I tried thinking on my own but to no avail.

However, just as she predicted, after the girls finished their move from the girls dorm—It was going to turn into a time of tribulations.

Part 3

"—Mononobe! You prefer me, don't you, Mononobe?"

Iris leaned forward and asked me.

"Mononobe Yuu, you said that it felt reassuring to be by my side, didn't you?"

Lisa looked at me sharply, seeking my agreement.

"Yuu is Tia's husband and must be next to Tia!"

Bouncing over to my side, Tia tugged at my clothing. On the opposite side, Ren pulled my sleeve gently.

"...Onii-chan, are I no good?"

"Mononobe-kun, I'd like to stay by your side too, if it's okay with you."

Ariella scratched her face shyly and glanced sideways at me.

"How unfortunate for you all. Yuu's side is the spot belonging to me. I won't concede it to anyone."

Kili touched my cheek from behind and declared strongly.

"Hey Kili! Get away from the Captain! That is the one spot I cannot concede to you!"

After Jeanne forcibly dragged me away from Kili, Shion trotted over to me in tiny steps.

"Papa... i wAnt To bE close To yOu."

"E-Even if you say that..."

I patted Shion's head, comforting her while looking around me.

We were at the entrance hall of Mitsuki's dorm. The girls' belongings, moved over from the girls dorm, were piled up here in a mountain.

It was currently 5pm. Streaming in from outside, the rays of dusk were casting shadows of the windows on the ground. Although we succeeded in moving the belongings before sunset... There was a tense atmosphere surrounding me right now.

Everyone was staring seriously at me. An urgent decision was thrust upon me. And what caused this was—

"Please calm down, everyone. Nii-san is caught in a dilemma too. How about following the rooming arrangement we had already assigned previously?"

Inserting herself between me and the others, Mitsuki remarked in exasperation.

Indeed—We were currently stuck in a fierce dispute over the distribution of rooms. As the master of the house, Mitsuki's intervention caused the girls to back off slightly, but Lisa immediately shook her head.

"—No, that is not agreeable at all. In the beginning, I did not object against the room assignments because it was a temporary arrangement for concealing the dragon marks whose color had changed. However, now that we have moved into your dormitory officially, Mitsuki-san, considering we will be living here for the long term, I disagree with maintaining the current rooming arrangement."

The other girls agreed with Lisa, but Mitsuki glared at them with displeasure.

"Your misgivings sound reasonable... Yet judging from the conversation between you earlier, all of you are merely contending for the room adjacent to Nii-san's, is that correct?"

"W-Well... I am simply... I am simply making this suggestion out of consideration for him. I-If... If Kili-san were to live next to him, she will surely break the wall..."

Lisa explained in a stammer, causing Kili to look offended.

"How rude. I won't be doing anything as barbaric as smashing a wall. That would prevent me from enjoying the pleasures of being neighbors. At most, I might drill a small hole."

"Drilling holes are absolutely forbidden!"

"Of course I know that... Sheesh. Can't you even take a joke?"

Covering her ears, Kili replied unhappily.

"—It certainly does not sound like a joke to me. I knew it, I should be the one to live next to Mononobe Yuu."

Lisa puffed out her chest and insisted, but Ariella and Ren objected.

"In that case, what's the difference if I took that room instead?"

"Mm!"

Iris raised her hand and added:

"I-I will protect the wall properly!"

"...Iris-san, that is not the point of contention here."

Mitsuki sighed with her palm against her forehead before saying to the rest of us:

"I understand—Regarding the matter of room assignments, let us save the discussion for another time. However, since the room adjacent to Nii-san's is causing such a heated contest, it will have to remain empty for now."

"Eh, no way..."

Iris whined unhappily and the other girls also showed dissatisfaction on their faces. They were not going to accept, apparently. Next, everyone looked at me.

I would have to be the one to make a choice if Mitsuki's decision were to be overturned without a dispute.

This was probably the "important choice" that Firill had predicted. However, this was not a question that could be answered straight away.

—By the way, didn't Firill say she was going to help me?

I glanced hopefully at her, who had kept silent so far.

Standing at the back of the group, Firill exchanged a glance with me then nodded with a smile.

"Excuse me, Mitsuki. As long as everyone stops fighting, it would not be an issue, right?"

Saying that, Firill took a step forward.

"Eh, yes... I suppose you are right."

Mitsuki nodded somewhat hesitantly.

"In that case, let's fight. The rooms will be picked based on victory rankings."

"Unacceptable—"

Just as Mitsuki's expression turned grim, Firill shook her head at her.

"I'm not talking about mock battles, but something even more fun than that."

"I see..."

Mitsuki showed an expression of comprehension after hearing Firill, but I was still left completely in the dark. However, Firill soon gave the answer.

"Yes—We will decide using a game."

Part 4

Everyone who was going to live in this dorm had gathered inside Mitsuki's room. Although her room was far more spacious than the ones in the girls dorm, it was still a bit cramped with ten-odd people packed inside.

"—Oh my, Mother is here too."

Seeing the presence of Vritra, who had been absent from the previous scene, Kili expressed surprise.

"Hmph, ye shall be determining residence locations. 'Tis interesting to me, more or less."

Suddenly turning her face away in a huff, Vritra was glancing at me for some reason.

"What's wrong?"

When I looked at her questioningly, Vritra glared at me with arms akimbo.

"...'Tis not like I am looking at thee, okay!?'

"But you were looking at me."

I corrected Vritra's strange declaration. Somehow, something about her choice of words seemed odd to me.

"Like I said, I was not looking at thee. I hate thee!"

"R-Really...?"

Finding Vritra's speech very odd, I stopped pursuing the matter.

—I suppose Vritra did hate me after all.

Not only did I foil her plan but also sealed away her power to keep her under house arrest. It would be only natural for her to feel that way. I averted eye contact guiltily.

"Hmm...? How odd... According to that book, 'twould arouse thy interest in me..."

However, Vritra cocked her head and murmured to herself quietly in surprise. Trying to figure if she was angry or not, I concentrated but still could not catch her words clearly.

"Mother seems to be saying something...?"

Kili looked troubled. At that moment, Mitsuki walked to the front of everyone.

"Well then, everyone, according to Firill-san's suggestion, we will be playing a game here to decide the rooming arrangements. For those who are currently living together, namely Lisa-san and Tia-san, Ariella-san and Ren-san, Jeanne-san and Shion-san, as well as Kili-san and Vritra-san, I intend to have you participate in the contest as partners in teams... Is there anyone who would like to change roommates or live alone instead?"

Mitsuki sought confirmation.

"I am fine with the current arrangement."

"Tia is okay with living with Lisa!"

Lisa and Tia answered simultaneously and smiled at each other.

"Let's continue to room together?"

"Mm... I don't want to separate from Onee-chan either."

Ariella asked and Ren nodded deeply.

"I wish to remain with Zwei too. No changes necessary."

"i wAnT tO Be wiTH... Mama."

Zwei held Jeanne's hand tightly. It was clear that she did not want to leave Jeanne.

"Well, someone has to keep an eye on Mother—Let me be the one to protect you."

"...'Tis not a choice for me regardless. Do as thou wishest."

Vritra answered Kili's teasing with displeasure.

After listening to everyone, Mitsuki nodded and continued.

"In that case, there are a total of four teams of two. Furthermore, Nii-san, myself, Iris-san and Firill-san room alone, so we will be participating individually."

However, I raised a question at this point.

"Hold on. If we're deciding on rooms, what point is there for you and I to participate? I'm fine with keeping my existing room..."

When I asked Mitsuki, she nodded with comprehension.

"If I were to win, Nii-san's room will be left unoccupied. If you were to win, Nii-san, you shall nominate someone to take the room adjacent to yours. Naturally, you may choose to leave it empty too."

"Uh..."

Hearing this, I could not help but gasp.

Then it was going to be the same as just now, right? I became painfully aware of the increasing pressure everyone was directing at me. No one was going to allow me to leave the room empty, I guess.

—I'd better lose the game as quickly as possible.

I committed my determination for defeat.

"It's ready. Let's start the game!"

After connecting the game console to the giant LCD television, Firill announced cheerfully.

Thus began the chaotic room wars.

"Simply stated, this is a variation of Double Six or Snakes and Ladders, a game that everyone knows about. You advance by casting dice with predetermined events triggering when you land on squares. This game is essentially based on luck without giving anyone an advantage. Oh of course, Tia, you're not allowed to hack the game."

Firill reminded Tia when explaining the game.

Having inherited Yggdrasil's authority, Tia was able to hack computers through electrical interference.

"Got it! Tia won't be cheating!"

Seeing Tia's matter-of-fact expression, Firill continued explaining.

"—Then there's no problem. Although it's possible to have four-player games, let's have each team play the game individually one after another to determine the rankings."

At that moment, I noticed something and asked Firill.

"Double Six is a race to the finish, right? This game will always end, right?"

Back when we were children, Mitsuki and I played a version of Double Six where we competed to see who could earn the most money. Judging from Firill's tone of voice, there did not seem to be any problems of that sort.

"Don't worry. This game does have a finish but no one can reach it in practice."

"...What do you mean by that?"

I asked with a frown. The same question seemed to appear on everyone else's face.

Next, Firill slowly took out the game software that was stored on casette tape. Judging from the faded packaging, this was an antique. On it was a difficult to read title—

"Mola?"

Reading out the title, Iris tilted her head in puzzlement.

"That's the scientific name of sunfish."

Explaining that, Firill inserted the cassette into the ancient game console and switched it on. Next, a pixelated picture of a sunfish and the title appeared, composed of large dots.

"...Compared to the games I have played with Firill-san so far, this is very old."

Seeing the flashing picture of the sunfish, Lisa murmured with interest.

"Fufu—This was created at the dawn of video games. A curious gem of which very few copies remain because it was too boring. I came across it by chance at an online auction and won the bid."

Firill recounted proudly. However, there was something I could not ignore in what she had said.

"Too boring... Is that the kind of game we want to play?"

When I asked that, Firill waggled her finger and said "you don't understand."

"Too boring is only when played alone. Things get very lively when you play this sort of game in a group."

Firill proceeded to seek agreement from Ariella nearby.

"Well—It's true. We often gather together in Lisa's room to play Firill's games back in the girls dorm... Games that look boring at a glance could actully turn out to be very fun."

"Mm... And there are many ways to enjoy games. Like naming game characters after Onii-chan."

Ren nodded to concur with Ariella.

"...Is that really okay?"

I had mixed feelings about creating clones of me elsewhere without my knowledge.

"Rest assured, Nii-san. I have been guiding 'you' properly the whole time."

Mitsuki spoke with a serious expression. She had probably been showing this look the whole time while playing games with the group.

After picturing her playing games, I was slightly relieved.

—It looked like Mitsuki had been taking breaks properly.

As student council president and captain of the Dragon Subjugation Squad, Mitsuki was often shouldering a heavy burden. She always looked busy and it made me worried about her.

"Mononobe-kun can't be used here on a whim, so relax. Then let's hurry and get started—Who wants to be first?"

Firill presented the controller and asked us.

"—Then I shall go first."

Mitsuki was the first to raise her hand. As a game of Double Six, the risk in playing right off the bat was very high. Even so, Mitsuki did not hesitate at all to volunteer as the first to play now.

The others intended to check what the game was like, so no one objected to Mitsuki going first.

"Okay, Mitsuki, here you go. Just select single player mode and roll the die."

"Understood."

Receiving the controller from Firill, Mitsuki sat down in front of the console and stared at the television.

Shown on the screen were the squares on the Double Six board. A small white dot was shaking at the start square.

"Is this white dot my position marker? What a plain design even for a game from the past."

"It's an egg, not a marker."

"A fish egg?"

"Yes, it represents your current state. This is a Double Six game about a sunfish's life cycle. When you advance, the egg hatches into fry before growing into young fish, maturing like that."

"...How innovative. In any case, I shall begin."

Mitsuki pressed the button to toss the die on the screen.

"Five? Not bad for an opening toss."

Mitsuki murmured after looking at the result. The white dot—the sunfish egg—advance automatically according to the die. The instant it stopped on the fifth square, the screen turned dark.

Immediately, a pixelated image appeared on the screen. It was a strangely realistic fish.

"Let me see—'A bonito has appeared. Evasion succeeds on four, five or six'...? Oh well, it means another toss of the die in any case."

After reading the message on the screen, Mitsuki pressed the button again. The die swiveled again and stopped on three.

The screen proceeded to darken again. This time, the words "Game Over" were displayed.

"Eh...?"

Mitsuki stared at the screen in shock, frozen in place.

Everyone seemed puzzled but Firill recorded something on a piece of paper in her hand without much surprise.

"Mitsuki, five squares huh..."

Hearing Firill's murmur, Mitsuki looked back hastily.

"W-Wait! Are you telling me that this is over? Umm... Isn't this Double Six? Normally speaking, you miss out a turn or return to the start, right...?"

Firill looked like she had been waiting for this reaction from Mitsuki and smiled proudly.

"Fufufu, this is the reason why this game is known as a curious gem. No second chances... A sunfish's life is over once it is eaten by a bonito. Double Six that ends with death—Mola is this type of game."

"...I feel like it does not even count as a game."

After hearing Firill's explanation, Mitsuki put down the controller, appalled.

"Too naive, Mitsuki. Perhaps that may be true at first glance, but the true value of games like Mola is in their realism."

"Realism?"

"Yes. A sunfish lays three hundred million eggs at a time, but only about one of them survives to adulthood."

"Well... I have heard of that."

Mitsuki could barely conceal the doubt on her face.

"According to the game designers of Mola, the probability of finishing this kind of Double Six game is one in three hundred million. In other words, this game completely simulates the life of a sunfish!"

Firill exclaimed loudly but the room was silent.

"Uh... It's not going to work if it lacks the fun of Double Six itself, right?"

Since no one was talking, I kept my voice lowered to make my comment.

Smiling wryly, Firill seemed to agree about the flaw of this Double Six game.

"Well, don't say it like that. Isn't it fun with everyone screaming and yelling? We also get quick outcomes."

"True... If the game drags on for too long, we'll never finish moving all the luggage tonight."

After I agreed reluctantly, Firill's expression mellowed. Then she sought the next challenger with a "Who's next!?"

"Let me go."

Jeanne instantly raised her hand.

"Mama... Do yOuR beSt!"

With Shion cheering for her, Jeanne walked over with Shion and sat down in front of the game console and picked up the controller.

"—Leave it to me. I'm sorry for everyone else but for me, this isn't a game to leave everything to fate. As long as I track the rotating die with my eyes, I'll be able to choose any outcome I want."

Jeanne spoke confidently and narrowed her eyes at the screen.

Jeanne was an outstanding sniper with excellent vision. Since her reflexes also far surpassed that of ordinary people, it was definitely possible.

"Hey Jeanne-chan, that's too unfair."

Kili gurmbled but Jeanne ignored her and started the game. She stared intently at the spinning die.

"For my sake and Zwei's, I must roll a six!"

Having said that, Jeanne pressed the button. The die read—

"O-One...? That's impossible."

Jeanne groaned with disbelief. Next to her, Firill explained:

"The spinning die is just part of the game's graphics. You can't see through the random number generation with your eyes."

"W-What did you say?"

Jeanne was rendered speechless. However, a serious event popped up on the square where she landed.

"A tuna has appeared. Evasion succeeds on five or six."

The same kind of fish graphic appeared on the screen as before, but this time, it was apparently a tuna fish.

"Hey, the evasion probability is lower than last time's!"

"Well, a tuna is bigger fish than a bonito after all."

Firill calmly replied to the complaining Jeanne.

"Damn it... Please, I must survive to advance!"

Jeanne prayed while tossing the die but the outcome was two. "Game Over" appeared again.

"Zwei... I'm sorry."

"yOu diD YoUr bEst."

Shion patted Jeanne's shoulder to comfort her disappointment.

Just as the atmosphere was turning awkward and silent, Ariella coughed and walked up.

"Well, just relax and take it on since it's a contest of pure luck. Leave it to me, Ren. I'm pretty strong when comes to confronting bad luck."

Despite saying that, Ariella did not show any arrogance on her face. She began the game.

"Mm, you'll definitely do it, Onee-chan."

Ren nodded with a trusting look, standing by Ariella's side to watch the game's outcome.

"Then I'll toss—Oh, it's one. The square with the tuna. But since it's me... Here."

She rolled a six matter-of-factly, successfully evading the tuna.

"Wow, it's the first time someone reached the second round."

Firill remarked poignantly.

"Okay, here I go again."

Ariella rolled the die again, obtaining a four this time. It was the square where Mitsuki had stopped just now.

"It's the bonito this time, but I've no intention of losing here."

Smiling confidently, Ariella rolled for evasion. She escaped the bonito successfully too.

"Amazing, Onee-chan!"

"Fufu—finding a way to survive even in the face of bad encounters. That's what it means to be a child of misfortune."

Ariella replied proudly to Ren who had exclaimed in joy. However, she accidentally pulled the controller, causing the console to choke. Suddenly, static appeared from screen while the cursor and the graphics stopped moving.

"Huh, what happened...?"

Ariella pressed the button but there was no reaction on the screen. Seeing this, Firill sighed apologetically.

"Oh dear... It hanged. It's a console dating back to that era, after all, so it's really sensitive. The slightest movement could cause it to hang. Starting over would be unfair, so this is the end for Team Ariella and Ren."

"……I'm sorry, Ren. Every time, at a critical point, I..."

Ariella slumped her shoulders but Ren shook her head.

"Don't say that. Being in first for now is good enough."

"—Thanks. Then let's pray that no one overtakes us."

Ariella encouraged Ren while moving over to a corner of the room.

Next, Lisa and Tia came over.

"What a shame, Ariella-san—Nevertheless, we will attempt to surpass your record."

"Lisa will come in first for sure!"

Strangely confident, the two of them sat down before the game console. Lisa held the controller while Tia sat down lightly on her lap.

It felt like a customary seating arrangement. I suspected that they always sat like that.

They looked exactly like a mother-daughter pair. However, I noticed Mitsuki's absence at that moment.

After searching back and forth with my eyes, I found Mitsuki sitting behind me—on the bed in the room, watching from outside the circle of spectators like me.

"...What's wrong? Are you feeling unwell again?"

Feeling concerned, I leaned towards Mitsuki and asked. Ever since touching me to resolve the color change in her dragon mark, Mitsuki's state of health had not been great.

However, she had rested properly in Charlotte's room after all the fighting was over and seemed like she was no longer feeling unwell.

Be that as it may, given Mitsuki's personality—Perhaps she was simply enduring it.

"Oh, do not worry—I am feeling fine. It is just that I recalled some memories from the past... It feels a little like... a dream come true."

Mitsuki scratched her cheek shyly and smiled wryly at me.

"A dream?"

"Yes—We had gathered to play like this before... But that was back when I had not located your whereabouts, Nii-san. All this time, I have prayed, hoping you could join us to play in such occasions."

Watching Lisa playing and the others gathered around her getting worked up, Mitsuki explained with nostalgia.

"Since then, so much has happened... Even including irreversible regrets... However, I feel that this moment already approaches my dream back then."

"Really...? That's wonderful."

Unable to think of anything special to say, I could only offer my thoughts. I was overjoyed to see Mitsuki looking so happy.

"Yes—Oh, it is 'Game Over' for Lisa-san and Tia-san too."

Mitsuki nodded with a smile and pointed towards the others.

"Wah... Eaten by a saury this time..."

"And we only advanced four squares..."

Tia and Lisa shrugged and yielded the stage.

"Very well, go forth, my daughter."

"It feels like you're strangely motivated, Mother. What on earth happened...?"

Next, Vritra walked over swiftly with Kili following her puzzled.

"Hmph—I simply wish to shake off the frustration of a losing streak. Thou intendest to live adjacent to him, yes? Then thou ought to do thy best."

"...I don't need to hear that from you. Although the dependence on luck pisses me off, I refuse to give up on the spot next to Yuu."

Nodding with a tensed expression, Kili sat down before the game console.

Vritra looked back, pointed at me and shouted harshly.

"Make no mistake, I have not the slightest desire to move in next to thee! It is not as though I intend to try hard for thy sake! Truly serious I am!"

"Sure, fine, got it."

I nodded at Vritra who kept nagging me.

"Yes, 'twould be meet... However, thy reaction is weaker than I expected."

For some reason, Vritra looked away with a disappointed expression towards the television.

"Everyone... is trying so hard. Nii-san, are you happy that you are so popular?"

"Not really. How should I put this...? I feel like Vritra doesn't seem to welcome me..."

With Mitsuki looking up at me, I scratched my head, not knowing what to say.

Mitsuki did not seem angry right now, but I had a feeling that irrevocable developments would unfold if I answered without thinking.

"Nii-san."

"Y-Yes?"

Seeing me respond respectfully to her, Mitsuki giggled.

"You do not need to be so worried. The question of whom you would like to live adjacent to you—I will not ask that sort of thing. I do know that you are shouldering the heavy burden of taking responsibility for all of us. However—"

Mitsuki paused there and stared at me with extraordinary seriousness.

"Just as the environment is changing in this manner, the relationship between me and you would no longer remain as it were. Hence, from now on, what kind of relationship you intend to construct with everyone... Please think carefully about it. Naturally, this includes your relationship with me."

"—I understand."

I nodded seriously while looking into Mitsuki's eyes. There was no need to hesitate or delay my response for this sort of thing.

At that moment, I heard someone shouting from the television direction.

"Jeez, what the heck!? Getting caught in an underwater volcanic eruption in the second square, what kind of sick joke is that!? It's instant death without even giving you a chance to roll! This kind of game is—"

"Wawah! Stop, Kili-chan! It's all my turn next!"

Iris pulled back the greatly upset Kili.

"Clearly it would have been possible to recreate all sorts of scenarios if living adjacent... What an incompetent daughter."

Vritra was pouting on the side with displeasure. Her words remained indecipherable but it seemed like she wanted to live next to me.

After she finished consoling Kili at last, Iris started the game. She rolled a six right off the bat.

"Wonderful! I passed Mitsuki-chan and Ariella-chan to become first!"

She cheered with her arms raised. Seeing Iris like that, Mitsuki sighed in dismay.

"—I was overtaken."

"Yeah."

"Oh well, I would simply keep the room adjacent to yours empty had I won, in any case... Whatever."

Without insisting, Mitsuki simply stated calmly.

"...But if you won, couldn't you use this chance to move to that room?"

"Yes, I could, but I am fine with living here. This room is directly above yours, Nii-san."

Mitsuki motioned to the floor suggestively with her eyes. Indeed, my room was right below.

"Mitsuki, you mean—"

I was touched by her expressing her wish to stay near me when Mitsuki instantly continued with solemnity.

"So long as I live here, I will instantly know of any commotion occurring in your room, Nii-san. Public morals are easily violated in this sort of coed housing arrangement. I will keep my eyes and ears open and observe carefully—Please be prepared."

"G-Got it."

Overwhelmed by Mitsuki's gaze, I nodded stiffly.

At that moment, Iris' mournful wail reached my ears.

"Oh, I got swallowed by a whale. That's too bad, since I actually hatched..."

It looked like it was "Game Over" for Iris too, but compared to the others, she had advanced much farther.

"Then that leaves only you and Firill-san. Nii-san, it is time for you to play, right?"

"—Yeah. I'll give it a shot as suitable."

Urged by Mitsuki, I walked over to Iris' side.

"I'm next, Iris. By the way, how many squares did you move forward?"

"...Fourteen."

"That's really—amazing."

I received the controller from Iris' hands while praising in admiration. According to what I had seen so far, reaching that point was quite difficult.

In that case, it was essentially impossible for me to win.

Just as expected, the game ended fast for me. Like Mitsuki, I was eaten by a bonito on the fifth square.

"...Nature is very cruel. Come, you're last, Firill."

Feeling like I had gotten a glimpse of the world of survival of the fittest, I called Firill.

Firill had a laptop on her lap and seemed to be running some kind of calculation, but she raised her head and stood up after hearing me.

"Okay—I've found the path to victory."

With triumphant confidence, she accepted the controller from my hand.

"...Is there a sure-win method? Nothing unfair, okay?"

Feeling a shred of suspicion, I stared at her.

"I'm not going to do anything unfair. I simply recorded everyone's playthrough and analyzed them to find ways to improve the odds. This is called orthodox methods or game strategy."

Firill replied, slightly offended.

"R-Really? Sorry I offended you but—I can't believe there's a strategy in a game that relies on luck."

"There is. The chance events in games are basically all governed by the rules of random number generation. Part of the calculation formula makes use of a value that changes every round, thus altering the result. Because of that, you can predict the result to some extent if you know what conditions appear in this random number generation. Old games are this simplistic."

"R-Random...?"

Firill's explanation basically flew over my head, but Ren, the computer expert, seemed to understand. She spoke up, rather displeased.

"Firill, this is... half cheating. It's bad manners to do it even if it's possible."

"Fufu, I beg to differ. In my opinion, anything humanly possible doesn't count as cheating. I'm simply making records then analyzing the patterns in them."

"Mm....."

Ren pouted, unconvinced.

"Jeez, don't be so angry. I'm not as smart as you, Ren, so even with data, I won't be able to figure out the exact formula. At best, what I know is that the result of the previous die roll and the duration in seconds of the current roll have an influence."

While saying that, firill started the game. She began to roll the die. The first roll was four—The square where Lisa's team had been eaten by a saury.

"See, the first roll can only be left to chance. The random number generator is reset every round, so all I can analyze are the evasion rolls. It's all over if I land on any squares with instant death. But even if that's the case my sunfish's chances of survival will increase greatly!"

Just as she claimed, Firill evaded the saury successfully.

Next, she arrived at the square with the sardine predator event. Calmly and confidently, she escaped again.

"Fufufu—I'm going to pass Iris and take the room next to Mononobe-kun's."

"Wah—Firill-chan is about to overtake me!"

Just as Iris lamented, Firill rolled a six. This placed her at the thirteenth square, one away from Iris' record.

The egg on the square had turned into a tiny fish. That was probably a sunfish fry.

However, I noticed a fundamental issue.

"Um, Firill—"

"Be quiet, Mononobe-kun, I'm currently concentrating. I need to use the data from Lisa's team here... Okay, one, two, three!"

Counting the seconds, Firill rolled the die and evaded successfully.

Next, she rolled a five.

"I did it! I'm first! The room next to Mononobe-kun's is mine!"

Firill cheered.

The fish shown on the screen was even bigger than Iris'. It was flashing on the square.

"Sighhh..."

Iris slumped her shoulders. The other girls sighed too.

"Umm, I'm sorry for interrupting your happy moment, but—"

I patted Firill on the shoulder while she was celebrating on her own.

"What's the matter, Mononobe-kun?"

When Firill turned her head back to look at me in surprise and confusion, I finished what I was trying to say earlier.

"Uh—If we move in all your belongings, Firill, your room will turn into book storage again. Back in the girls dorm, you've been using your room as a library while you stayed in Lisa's room, right?"

"Oh."

Firill exclaimed in a silly voice and froze.

"—In that case, it will be no different from leaving the room unassigned. Hence, no one will feel it is unfair. A most laudable outcome, congratulations."

Mitsuki stepped forward from the back of the group and announced with a shrug.

"That's not good at all—"

"Then will you dispose of your books?"

Mitsuki asked the complaining Firill.

"No way! These books are the absolute minimum."

"Then please resign yourself."

"Sighhhhhhhh..."

Mitsuki's declaration caused Firill to hang her head.

Thus, our little war came to an end without issue to mark the beginning of our new life.

Part 5

"It's been so long since I last returned to this room..."

I sat down at my desk and looked at the room emotionally.

After dinner, everyone started moving their belongings to their new rooms and I helped them out too.

However, because there was not enough time to move all the luggage, we prioritized necessities and left the rest for tomorrow. The majority of Firill's books remained in the entrance hall.

I leaned against the back rest. My entire body was fatigued and I still had to work hard tomorrow.

"Let's sleep earlier tonight."

Muttering to myself, I stood up. At that moment, I touched the table with my hand—But something felt off.

"...There's no dust accumulated."

Ever since setting off for Japan after the school festival, I had not returned to this room. Upon my return to Midgard, I had been quarantined in Charlotte's room the whole time.

Even though my room had been unoccupied for a month or so, the furniture and bed were very clean and tidy.

After looking elsewhere in the room, I discovered other things that felt odd.

There were subtle changes in the positioning of small articles. The air itself in the room felt different too.

Holding the master key, Mitsuki might have entered to clean and tidy, but if that were the case, the bed should be untouched.

Did she straighten out the sheets when coming in to clean?

Just as I cocked my head, confronted with this incomprehensible situation, I heard knocking from my door.

"Hmm...?"

When I walked to the door, wondering who it was, Vritra entered the room without permission. She was wearing a black dress.

—Speaking of which, I definitely had not locked the door.

Since I had been living in this dorm with only Mitsuki until now, I had not developed much of a habit of locking my door. This was something I must pay more attention to from now on.

"Hmph, it seemeth there are no others present."

After looking around the room, Vritra walked up to me.

"What do you want, Vritra?"

Seeing Vtritra confirm that we were alone in the room, I asked slightly warily. Vritra pouted with displeasure.

"—'Twould be thee instead. Dost thou not have reason to seek me out? I... have behaved strangely on numerous occasions, yes? Thou ought to be very curious."

"Behaved strangely...? Like glaring at me many times and suddenly losing your temper?"

After I asked in confusion, Vritra nodded with satisfaction.

"Hmph, thou noticed after all. Just like in manga—human thought processes are very simplistic. I shall make one correction. When I claimed to hate thee last time, that was not true."

"R-Really?"

"Indeed. How now? Art thou happy?"

It was a bit annoying to see Vritra ask me that while inexplicably showing a proud expression all of a sudden—Whatever, let's not make a fuss for now.

"Well... If I had to pick between happy and unhappy, I guess it's still happy. I can't help it if you dislike me, but that's quite tiring."

"Fufu, in other words, thou currently feelst gratitude and goodwill towards me. That implies a deepened relationship. In that case, thou shouldst place thy full trust in me. From this point onwards, no matter what I ask, answer honestly without question."

Vritra spoke in full confidence but I began to correct her.

"No, calling it a deepened relationship... is a bit too much."

"W-What!? Is it still insufficient!? Hmph... How unexpected. In that case, 'twould mean I must resort to more advanced methods recorded in those books..."

Vritra made a surprised look and kept murmuring to herself.

"What the heck is going on? Did something happen recently?"

I asked with a frown. However, Vritra ignored my question and instantly took off her black dress.

"Wha!?"

Vritra's sudden undressing action made me exclaim in surprise. She still had camisole under the dress, so she was not naked, but this was not a respectable appearance to be seen by others in public.

Behind the sheer fabric, I could catch faint glimpses of panties and things I was not supposed to see.

"Though circumstances force my hand, I permit thee to do unto this stand-in everything thou desirest. Come, do not hold back, touch me. Male-female intercourse is not merely reproductive behavior for ye humans but also the deepest level of interaction, is it not?"

Vritra spread her arms and stood there with a "come at me." Her attire was very dangerous, but how should I put it...? I did not feel the slightest thing that could be called arousal. Thanks to that, I was able to stay relatively calm.

"...In other words, you want us to get along better, Vritra?"

That was the conclusion I had deduced from what she had said so far.

Vritra showed an expression that seemed to read "you finally understand me" and smiled happily.

"Indeed, that is so! I wish to hold a candid discussion with thee in preparation for the arrival of the ninth calamity. This is essential."

"The ninth calamity..."

"Hast thou forgotten what Yggdrasil's successor and I have said?"

Seeing me troubled by her sudden bringing up of the matter, Vritra frowned.

"No, of course I remember. All the dragons we've been fighting so far were counterdragons that came into being in order to resist the great calamities that would mess up the world... There is a possibility that I am the ninth counterdragon—Neun. Is that right?"

While we were taking refuge underground of Midgard, I had learned about dragons from Tia and Vritra.

However, NIFL's invasion, Ariella's betrayal and the battle against Major Loki had me totally occupied with the crises at hand, pushing dragon matters off to a corner of my mind.

"Indeed—I used to dismiss this possibility as very unlikely, but after witnessing thy use of Hraesvelgr's authority in battle, I have changed my mind. 'Tis likely without doubt that thou art the ninth counterdragon holding the authority for opposing the ninth calamity."

"Well... I already suspected whether I was a dragon or not back when I marked Iris and the others. However... I don't actually know much about the ninth calamity or my own authority."

After I said that while scratching my head, Vritra made a critical look.

"Thou art truly... calm."

"Hmm... Is this situation already urgent? Then I'd better call the others to discuss—"

Seeing Vritra's reaction, I made a suggestion but that made her flustered instead.

"N-Not necessary, it is not that urgent yet! Thou needst not contemplate the matter nor unsettle the others by mentioning it. Nevertheless, simply as a precaution ahead of time,, I wish to establish a relationship of trust between thee and I."

It looked like the ninth calamity was not urgent or imminent.

Relieved, I placed my hand on Vritra's head.

"—Got it. In that case, let's have a heart to heart chat."

While patting her gorgeous black hair, I smiled at her.

"Wow! It finally came to this! Fufu... How unbelievable. I wonder if my past self had felt this same sense of reliability when fighting alongside Kiskanu back then...?"

Vritra obediently allowed me to pat her head. Closing her eyes partially, she hugged me at the waist with emotion.

Two sizes smaller than Kili, Vritra had a fairly high body temperature. I could clearly feel her warmth and softness through our clothing.

"H-Hey, Vritra?"

"I felt repulsed by it earlier, but now, it feeleth that allowing thee to do as thou pleasest with this stand-in would not be unpleasant. Come, let us deepen our trusting relationship!"

"W-Wait! There's no need to go that far, is there!?"

"Still not enough. 'Twould trouble me if thou did not trust me further. Let our bare skin overlap, turning thee into my captive, then develop a strong obsession and dependence on me. With that, thou shalt never betray me."

"That's not trust! It's something else!"

I retorted while Vritra pulled me. Despite her small size, she was very strong.

Even though it was just a stand-in, this body probably had very high physical strength.

—Knock knock

At that moment, I heard another knocking at the door.

Vritra and I froze on the spot and looked towards the door.

"Are you free, Nii-san?"

It was Mitsuki's uncertain voice.

"...!?"

With Vritra in a camisole before my eyes, I instantly understood. This was undoubtedly a huge crisis.

I thought Vritra would not care about something like this, but for some reason, she seemed very agitated too, murmuring "no way, why did it have to be her in particular—" Was she worried about having to write repentance essays like Kili...?

"...Nii-san, I am coming in, alright?"

Without hearing an answer, Mitsuki announced. Just as when Vritra had entered without permission, the door was not locked.

I picked up Vritra's petite body and placed her on the bed—Then I covered her with the sheets. Next, I picked up the dress she had taken off and stuffed it under the sheets too.

"Hmm, what art thou doing—"

"Please, just keep quiet for a while."

I whispered quietly to the grumbling Vritra. To hide the bulge under the shees, I sat down on the side of the bed.

At that very moment, the door oopened and Mitsuki entered the room.

"—Oh you are here, Nii-san. Answer me, at least."

Mitsuki looked at me disapprovingly.

"Uh, sorry, I'm a bit sleepy."

"Oh... My apologies, Nii-san. Go ahead and rest while I take care of a certain matter swiftly."

After apologizing, Mitsuki entered the washroom for some reason.

What on earth was going on? I frowned.

Hidden in the bed, Vritra remained quiet obediently as I had asked.

Had things gone in the normal pattern, Vritra probably would have thrown a tantrum, then Mitsuki would scold me harshly after witnessing such a situaton but at this rate, perhaps I might be able to get through this unscathed.

Experiencing first-hand the importance of a trusting relationship, I waited for Mitsuki to take care of whatever she needed to do.

"Are you done?"

Although I was curious about what Mitsuki was doing, talking too much could increase the chances of her discovering Vritra. Hence, I asked that instead.

"Yes—Umm, Nii-san... You have not used the washroom yet after entering the room, have you?"

"No, I haven't."

I confirmed Mitsuki's query that had been asked in strong tone of voice.

"Th-Then... Has anything struck you as being out of place...?"

Fidgeting awkwardly, Mitsuki stole glances at me.

"Anything out of place? Oh—The room is spotless without a speck of dust. I'm guessing you came by to clean the room, right...?"

Hearing my answer, Mitsuki jumped then sighed deeply.

"—Since you have noticed this much, Nii-san, there is no point in keeping it a secret from you. There is probably evidence lingering on the bed too..."

"O-On the bed?"

With the subject drawn to the one location I did not want Mitsuki to investigate, I could not help but feel my heart rate accelerate. However, it looked like Vritra's presence was not going to be exposed.

"Yes... My hair, my scent or the like. There are probably lingering traces."

Blushing, Mitsuki confessed in embarrassment.

"So... Mitsuki, you mean you had been using this room?"

Figuring out what she was implying, I confirmed.

"Yes, I am sorry—While you were being quarantined, Nii-san, I felt very uneasy... Whenever I had difficulty falling asleep, I would come over to sleep in this room."

Mitsuki apologized shly and showed me what she was hiding behind her.

"...A toothbrush?"

"I came over to retrieve it when I remembered that I had left it in your washroom. But since it has come to light after all, may I continue to leave it here?"

Mitsuki looked up at me with warm eyes, asking me.

No matter how dense I was, I still understood the meaning behind this question. Mitsuki was asking for permission to sleep in my room from here onwards.

However, I did not think this sort of thing actually needed confirmatioin.

"Sure—I don't mind."

"...Thank you so much, Nii-san!"

Mitsuki's expression instantly brightened up and she walked quickly into the washroom. After putting the toothbrush away, she came up to me again.

"Well then, Nii-san, I am terribly sorry for disturbing you tonight. Please have a good rest."

"Sure, goodnight."

In a very good mood, Mitsuki answered:

"Yes—Good night to you, Nii-san."

Mitsuki bowed gently then left my room.

"Pwah!"

At the same time, Vritra poked her head out from under the sheets.

"—Sorry, Vritra. Thank you so much for staying still quietly."

"'Twas nothing. I too... must avoid perturbing that girl's emotions as much as possible."

Vritra spoke seriously. After putting on her black dress properly, she got off the bed and walked to the door.

Having braced myself for an ensuing argument, I found my prediction wrong.

"You're leaving?"

"Yes—I have accomplished mine objective tonight, in a manner of speaking. Additionally, on further thought, 'twould not be right for our relationship to deepen too much."

Looking pensive, Vritra stood at the doorway and looked back at me.

"Irregular—no, my comrade Neun. Thou must treasure thy younger sister."

Vritra's sudden comment made me very confused.

Treasure my younger sister—Mitsuki?

"What's with saying that suddenly? I'll do that even without you telling me."

I answered seriously and Vritra's expression turned slightly gentle.

"Very well."

After saying that, Vritra left my room.

Not knowing why she had said all this, I laid myself down on the bed with a frown.

Indeed, there was a sweet scent lingering on the bed. It was not mine.

But ultimately, I could not distinguish whether it was left behind by Mitsuki or Vritra.

Chapter 02 – White Knight of Elegance

Part 1

"—Well then, allow me to introduce our newest students to everyone."

Presiding over the assembly proceedings, Mitsuki's voice resounded within the dimmed hall.

Standing on the stage with Mitsuki under the spotlight were ten-odd girls dressed in Midgard's uniform.

Including mine, all eyes of the students in the audience were directed at the stage in anticipation.

"This brings back memories, Mononobe."

Sitting on my right, Iris commented quietly.

"Yeah... They're the first batch of new students since Tia."

I kept my voice low and answered while looking at Tia, who was sitting on my left. Tia averted eye contact in embarrassment.

"Please don't recall what happened then. Tia caused so much trouble for everyone..."

"Yeah—But no one minds anymore."

Stroking Tia's head, I replied.

Back then, Tia considered herself a dragon and had impulsively used transmutation against Mitsuki when she denied Tia's identity as a dragon.

As a result, the majority of the students feared Tia and she was not placed into a homeroom with other girls of her age. Instead, she was assigned to Brynhildr Class where me and the others belonged. But after the Basilisk battle, Tia's interactions expanded and during the school festival, she demonstrated to me that she had made close friends.

"Hmm... Thanks. But Tia is very worried whether they'll mess up like Tia."

Tia cast a gaze of worry at the girls on the stage.

They had started introducing themselves in sequence from right to left. It was now a southeast Asian girl's turn. Since she was unable to use Midgard's lingua franca of Japanese, Mitsuki spoke on her behalf.

Including this girl, more than half of the new students were new to me.

However, I already knew the four on the left. These four stood out in many ways, attracting attention from the students as soon as they got on stage.

—Very conspicuous, as one would expect.

Like Tia, I was very worried about them.

It could very well turn into even worse chaos than Tia's time.

To prevent these four from standing out too much, Principal Charlotte had enrolled them together with the other new students whose arrival to Midgard had been delayed by NIFL's imposed inspection.

—Please, don't say anything weird.

Seeing it was *her* turn next, I prayed in my heart.

"—Next is Kili-san."

The instant Mitsuki spoke this name, a clamor rose up in the hall.

"Everyone must have seen it on television previously—She had sought Midgard's protection in order to defy NIFL's intervention. Due to many things happening in the Principality of Erlia, it took plenty of effort... However, I am extremely pleased for the fact that she could finally come to Midgard."

While presenting the official story for why Kili transferred, Mitsuki grimaced slightly. Well, this was only a subtle change only I could see. The other students most likely missed it.

As the student council president, she was obliged to deliver diplomatic statements to suit occasions, but this time, the "lie" was a bit big.

Kili had transferred into Midgard before under the identity of Tachikawa Honoka. The fact that Honoka and Kili were the same person was not disclosed and ordinary students probably would not question it... But to Mitsuki, she was probably having quite mixed feelings.

Refraining from reading out the full name of Kili Surtr Muspelheim was probably to prevent the audience from associating her with the dragon-worshiping cult, the Sons of Muspell.

From the perspective of ordinary students, Kili was an activist against NIFL's unfair treatment of Ds.

As long as Kili maintained it, this cover story would be perfect.

"Nice to meet you, everyone. My name is Kili. I am very happy to be here at Midgard and would like to get along with all of you. However—"

Kili started with an ordinary self-introduction, but halfway through, she suddenly altered her tone.

Her exuded aura changed. After narrowing her eyes to gaze sharply at the students, she declared in an ice-cold voice:

"—You all know Mononobe Yuu, right? He is mine. If anyone dares make a move on him, I won't forgive her, got that? Please remember this well, everyone."

After issuing this warning, Kili produced a business-like smile.

The entire hall fell silent. Recovering first, Mitsuki coughed.

"Umm... Kili-san has just made some inappropriate and easily misconstrued statements and she will be properly educated afterwards. Until her twisted mindset is corrected, I shall have her write repentance essays nonstop, so please do not worry, everyone."

Mitsuki stared at Kili while speaking in a commanding tone of voice.

"Oh no... even more repentance essays!?"

Kili grumbled anxiously but Mitsuki ignored her and started to introduce the next new student.

"Next is Ritra-san. She is Kili-san's cousin. Due to the discovery of Ds, the ability to transmute matter, in the family, she has transferred in as well."

The one being introduced was the girl two sizes smaller than Kili—Vritra.

Of course, she was not a D and Ritra was an alias. However, there was no way in hell we could call her the black dragon—"Black" Vritra.

To be honest, we also had the option of keeping her in confinement, but Iris said "I'd feel so sorry for Vritra-chan if she had to watch the house alone!"

—Hence, enrolling her as a student made it easier to keep her under supervision. Thus, we transferred her into the school according to the procedure for Ds.

Bored, Vritra stretched and said:

"Yawn... Oh, hmm, I am Ritra. That is all."

As though saying that was enough of a self-introduction, she looked at Mitsuki. The students were looking at the unmotivated Vritra in puzzlement. They most likely pegged her as a different kind of weirdo compared to Kili.

Mitsuki sighed lightly and moved on to introducing the remaining two.

"Then next is the youngest student ever in Midgard's history, Shion Zwei Shinomiya-san!"

As soon as she spoke, everyone's gaze gathered on the tiny girl. This was followed by cheers of "so cute!" resounding all over the hall.

Trembling, Shion held the hand of the unintroduced girl beside her.

From appearance, Shion looked even younger than Tia, pretty much early elementary school age. However, her actual age was not so. Counting from the time when she had awakened at the Asgard lab, less than a month had passed. Although her apparent age was what was recorded in the family registry, I was pretty certain that students younger than Shion were not going to show up again.

"i am Shion Zwei Shinomiya... Nice to meet yoU all."

Nervously and politely, Shion introduced herself.

Although her Japanese lacked a little fluency and her motions were slightly stiff, this made her even more adorable to everyone. Cheers arose again. Frightened, Shion hid behind the girl next to her.

Seeing this, Mitsuki continued to explain Shion's situation.

"I believe all of you must be very curious about her family name. Shion-san is Shinomiya-sensei's relative, but due to her complicated family circumstances and the fact that her mental stability depends on staying close to her current guardian, there is some risk involved—"

Mitsuki finished slowly and came to the girl whom Shion was hugging tightly.

The hall went into a clamor again. After all, the girl on the left end was the most striking from the very beginning.

Normally speaking, Kili, who had appeared on television before, and Shion, the youngest, would attract the most attention. However, there was a great difference between this girl at the end compared to all the other girls standing on the stage.

She—*was dressed in a male uniform*.

"...Consequently, as a special exception, we have hired Shion-san's guardian as Midgard staff so that they can live together. But just as you can see, she is of the same age as we are and similarly entitled to the right of education. After careful consideration, I have authorized *her* enrollment in my capacity as student council president. Perhaps some of you might have doubts about a non-D becoming a student of this school, but please try to understand."

Mitsuki emphasized the word "her."

The clamor grew more and more intense, but when the introduced cross-dressing girl and Shion took a step forward, the hall quieted down.

Everyone was waiting for her to speak.

"I am Zwei's guardian—Jeanne Hortensia."

After she—Jeanne Hortensia—spoke in a dignified voice to introduce herself, the entire venue erupted with noise.

Rather than a commotion echoing throughout the hall, they were screams. However, these screams were not emitted out of fear or surprise.

I had heard such screams on television many times—Adolescent girls screaming from the bottom of their hearts at the sight of their idols.

In other words... This was what people called a fan scream.

"W-What's going on?"

I could not help but cover my ears and look around me. All the girls in the other homerooms were worked up in excitement with blushing cheeks.

Also feeling puzzled by this reaction, Jeanne hastily continued her self-introduction.

"U-Umm, I am a girl despite dressing like this! I wear a male uniform because it feels more reassuring—"

Jeanne emphasized her gender as a girl but the fan screaming grew even louder.

Yells of "so handsome!" could be heard all over the place.

"Jeanne-chan is so popular."

Seated on my right, Iris remarked poignantly.

"...Yeah. Dressed like that, Jeanne undoubtedly looks like a young and handsome man."

Platinum blonde hair, a prim and proper face, a slender physique—This appearance could easily rival that of idol celebrities.

Regardless of gender, Jeanne's "beauty" was very eye catching.

"Such a far cry from my debut."

Iris looked at me from the side while I was muttering to myself.

"Eh, Mononobe... Don't tell me you're jealous?"

"O-Of course not."

I frantically denied it. Back when I went up on the stage, the audience was eyeing me with a complicated mixture of curiosity and wariness. Fan screaming was nothing to be jealous of. Indeed, nothing to be jealous of at all.

Even so, Iris smiled and comforted me.

"Don't worry. To me, umm... You're the most handsome, Mononobe."

Seeing Iris blushing, my face turned red all at once.

Noticing that, Tia hugged my arm on the left.

"Tia thinks Yuu is the most handsome too! Tia is a good wife and will never be unfaithful! Yuu can rest assured!"

"...Th-Thank you."

I thanked Tia but her words caused my chest to tighten.

Iris and Tia were being considerate to me on their own, but I was wavering from their words and behavior. Didn't that make me unfaithful to them? Still, they permitted it.

—This was no good.

I did not know what in particular was wrong or how to rectify it.

However, feeling guilty about this, I was definitely not properly confronting the girls' feelings for me.

I must take responsibility. I must do what I can and do it well.

But when facing mutually exclusive wishes, I became lost and unable to take any action.

Hence, as I was now, my resolve was incomplete.

In all sorts of ways, I probably—I must become even stronger.

Part 2

"—Thus, these four will be the newest members of Brynhildr Class from now on. As mentioned before, but I will say it again, I hope everyone can get along."

Inside our classroom—Brynhildr Class' homeroom teacher, Shinomiya-sensei, was introducing the new students in front of the lectern.

Naturally, these new students were Kili, Vritra, Shion and Jeanne.

The seats in the classroom were increased to accommodate their transfer. Behind the third row in the back where Mitsuki, Iris and I were sitting, a new row was added—another three desks and chairs.

This was one less than the number of new students, but the middle seat in the front row was originally empty. With this, all the newcomers had a spot to themselves.

"Then regarding seating... It would be best for Shion to adjacent to Jeanne Hortensia, I suppose? You two should sit together in the back row."

"YeS!"

"...Affirmative."

Shion nodded very energetically. On the other hand, Jeanne nodded with a haggard expression.

Skipping past me, Shion smiled innocently.

"i siT, beHiNd Papa."

Shion took the middle seat in the back row—Behind me. At the lectern, Kili looked slightly displeased but did not say anything.

Seeing Shion's smile, Jeanne recovered somewhat.

"Captain... Everyone, I look forward to getting along with all of you from now on."

After walking unsteadily to the right seat in the back row—the one behind Mitsuki—Jeanne smiled feebly and greeted everyone.

"You seem so tired. Are you okay?"

I asked in concern and Jeanne shook her head lightly.

"...I haven't been this tired since quite a while. Ambushed by students outside the hall, I had to go all-out to shake them off."

For Jeanne, a former member of the special forces, to be this exhausted, the students ambushing her must have been very persistent and obsessive.

"Well, being popular is a good thing. The commotion should subside later."

"I hope so..."

Jeanne smiled wryly and lay down on her desk.

After looking at the two remaining seats, Shinomiya-sensei gazed sharply at Kili.

"Kili Surtr Muspelheim. Taking into account your speech at the entrance ceremony, you very evidently a problem child. Consequently, I will place you in the front row where it is easiest to monitor you."

"No. That's too far away from Yuu. I want to sit behind Iris-chan."

Ignoring Shinomiya-sensei's instruction, Kili walked to the back row.

"—Are you sure? You are free to choose defiance, but in that case, I will have to restrict your freedom and pile on a greater number of repentance essays."

"....."

Shinomiya-sensei's warning caused Kili to halt and her face began to twitch.

"Do you know how many repentance essays I've written so far?"

"I do. *Merely* fifty, right?"

Seeing Shinomiya-sensei's fully serious expression, Kili could only sigh deeply.

"...Fine, be that way. I got it. I'll sit here, okay?"

Kili reluctantly sat down where Shinomiya-sensei had indicated. On her left and right respectively, Lisa and Firill smiled wryly. Behind her, Tia thumped her own chest and announced, "Tia will watch with widened eyes to stop Kili from doing bad things!"

"Then I shall sit there."

The last one remaining, Vritra took the left seat in the back row without waiting for Shinomiya-sensei's instructions—The spot behind Iris.

"Welcome, Vritra-chan!"

Vritra nodded generously at Iris who was showing a carefree smile.

"...Hmm. Although I have no interest in the knowledge of ye humans, I am very looking forward to 'school life' after reading some books. 'Twould serve well to kill time."

Turning her head back, Kili shrugged with exasperation.

"Mother is arrogant as ever."

"Kili, aren't you calling the kettle black?"

However, when Tia instantly retorted, Kili showed a complicated expression.

"Tia... Aren't you being too strict towards me?"

"Because Tia will be Kili's senior starting today. Tia must look after juniors properly."

Tia puffed out her chest and replied.

"Wow, Tia is amazing."

"Mm... Good job."

Ariella and Ren praised her too, deeply impressed.

It looked like Tia took seniority very seriously. Having never considered this, I was slightly surprised.

"...I enrolled together with Tia last time."

Kili grumbled unhappily. However, since Tia was telling Shion and the others "you can rely on Senpai from now on!", she did not catch Kili's words.

"Mononobe, we have to work hard too!"

"—You're right."

I nodded in response to Iris, who was clenching her fist with heightened spirits.

Clearly, school life was going to become very lively with the addition of new classmates.

Part 3

Midgard's underground facilities were severely damaged during NIFL's invasion and had yet to be fully restored.

Hence, due to repairs in progress for the underground training sites, the practical lessons for periods five and six were suspended for now.

Thus, classes ended before noon on the first day school resumed—However, the end of the day brought a problem with it.

"I never expected this..."

After school in the classroom, Mitsuki sighed deeply.

"I was planning to have lunch at the cafeteria before going back, but looks like that's out of the question."

Sitting at her desk, Iris commented while rubbing her stomach.

"Well, we'll just have to eat at Mitsuki's dorm today. Showing Shion the cafeteria will have to wait until next time."

I agreed and looked at Shion sitting behind me, looking very bored.

"cAfeTEriA, quIcK."

"Sorry, Zwei, it's all my fault..."

Hearing Shion, Jeanne apologized with apparent guilt.

"Yes. It's all your fault, Jeanne-chan, so find a solution."

Kili spoke in exasperation but Ariella and Ren defended Jeanne.

"—It can't be helped. Mitsuki already threatened them with the submission of so many repentance essays and it still turned out like this."

"Mm... The crowds grow every time break comes around. At this rate, maintaining order inside the school will be very hard."

Seeing the two of them so weary, I thought back to today's commotions.

It had happened after the first period ended. A whole crowd of Jeanne's fans rushed over.

Back then, they were only shouting "Jeanne-sama!" from the window, but when second period ended, the crowd had grown further, making it difficult even to go to the washroom.

Seeing this, Mitsuki reminded the girls that making noise in the school building would be detrimental to studies, hence the girls were driven away—However, things were still not resolved.

With the sound of the door opening, Lisa, Firill and Tia entered the classroom.

"—The situation outside turns out to be the same as predicted."

"Almost the entire student body has gathered together. Unable to cause trouble inside the school building, they are probably going to do it outside."

"There will surely be a big commotion as soon as you go out!"

Hearing our reports, Jeanne slumped her shoulders.

"Why did this happen…? Don't they believe I'm a girl?"

Jeanne murmured in puzzlement and Lisa looked at her with sympathy.

"No, I believe they should know that you are a girl—"

"…What do you mean?"

Jeanne asked Lisa with a frown. Curious about Lisa's viewpoint, I also paid attention and listened.

"This students at this school have reached an age when curiosity about romance has started to develop. In other words, they cannot resist the temptations of adolescence. However, here at Midgard where almost everyone is female, there are limited targets for their fantasies."

Saying that, Lisa looked at me.

"In other words, I'm not good enough?"

When I sighed, Lisa shrugged lightly.

"On the contrary, Mononobe Yuu. Well—it would be better to say that they have difficulty wrapping their minds around 'the correct usage of Mononobe Yuu.'"

"…What are you talking about?"

Completely unable to understand what she was saying, I tilted my had. Lisa raised an index finger and began to explain like a teacher.

"I am referring to the fact that your conquest is too challenging. This is objective fact—You are the sole male in the school and with such high achievements under your belt too. Y-You, umm, you look rather attractive as well. There is even a fan club for you in school."

"R-Really...?"

Having lost a bit of confidence as a human being due to seeing Jeanne's popularity, I relaxed my expression after finding out I was validated.

"Yes... Which is why they are at a loss regarding what to do, right? Getting too involved with you could mean a dramatic change to the rest of their lives. For example—like us as we are right now."

"Hmm... I get that. I'll be careful."

I hastily nodded with solemnity when reminded by Lisa, who smiled faintly in response.

"In that case—Excellent. Well, the girls also understand that half-baked resolve is not enough to build a relationship with you. Although the fact that you selected us has not been disclosed, there is still the great risk of losing their powers from pregnancy. Besides, Mitsuki-san, and... th-the rest of us too, have been keeping a close watch over you. Approaching you is physically difficult."

Lisa spoke with a blush. Next, Firill leaned towards me and whispered.

"...Lisa is very well respected and something like the master of the girls dorm. I think the girls running amok has got something to do with Lisa moving out."

"Hold it, Firill-san! Please do not apply a description like 'master' to me!"

After hearing Firill's comment, Lisa went red and complained.

"Ahem—Anyway, the difficulty level in Jeanne-san's conquest is not as high. Although she looks like a handsome youth, since she is not the opposite sex, there is no punishment for violating the rule against inappropriate interactions between genders. Even very intimate relations... w-will not have any risk of pregnancy."

Was she picturing something? Lisa averted eye contact in embarrassment.

Hearing this, Ariella chimed in.

"Although Mitsuki and Lisa are very popular among the girls, a cross-dressing beauty is special, after all. Supply and demand has never matched up this well."

"I-I am not some kind of cross-dressing beauty... Honestly, I just feel more at ease in male clothing—"

Shaken, Jeanne explained herself. Kili casually began to tease her.

"In that case, why don't you just wear a girl's uniform? I'm sure you'll look very cute in a skirt, Jeanne-chan."

Saying that, Kili picked up the hem of her skirt. Jeanne went red and shook her head.

"I-I can't accept that kind of disgraceful attire!"

"...You do realize your comment is an insult to every girl in the school?"

Kili's surprised question prompted Jeanne to frantically apologize to Lisa and the others.

"Oh... I-I am very sorry—I just mean when I'm the one wearing it... I don't think it suits me..."

Her voice grew softer and softer and she lowered her head.

"I think you're mistaken..."

"Eh!? C-Captain—Please don't make fun of me!"

I was simply offering my honest opinion but Jeanne went red to her ears and shouted at me.

Silently listening to our conversation, Mitsuki looked at Jeanne as though making a decision.

"—No other way. To prevent Jeanne-san from being followed, please exit from the back door. It is an entrance meant for accessing the staff dorms, but if you take a long detour along the coast, you will be able to return to my dorm."

"Ehhh!? I can't go home with the Captain?"

Jeanne asked Mitsuki with an expression of shock.

"—No. If you were to be discovered, Jeanne-san, it could cause chaos. In that case, Nii-san and me aside, that would be quite dangerous for Shion-san who is still young, would it not?"

"Hmm... T-True. I understand. Let's do that."

Jeanne nodded with difficulty once Shion was brought up.

"Mama... wE haVe to seParAte?"

Shion clutched Jeanne's clothing with unease.

"...Yes. But Captain—Papa—will accompany you. Captain, I am leaving Zwei in your hands."

"Yeah, no problem. Shion—go home with P-Papa, okay?"

Still slightly reluctant to call myself 'Papa,' I nodded stiffly and extended my hand to Shion.

After hesitating between me and Jeanne for a while, Shion held my hand.

"...Papa. tOgethEr."

Her tiny hand gripped stronger than I expected, causing an emotion I had never felt before to swell up within me.

An intense desire to protect her naturally filled my heart. I suppose this was what you would call paternal instinct.

"Hmm—"

However, Iris was staring at me without saying a word.

"W-What's wrong?"

"...Nothing."

Iris put on a poker face and others reacted the same way except for Kili who leaned in and smiled mischievously at me.

"Fufu, Iris-chan and the others are jealous. You guys really look like a family."

"Wha—"

"Of course, I'm jealous too, okay? Hurry and make a baby with me."

Her smooth fingertip slid over my cheek, causing my heart rate to quicken.

However, Mitsuki stepped in between us and drove Kili away.

"Kili-san! Please distance yourself from Nii-san! We are still students and inappropriate interactions between the genders are forbidden!"

"Eh—Why?"

"There is no why!"

While this battle of words was raging, Shion gripped my hand tightly.

"Yes, what is it?"

"Papa, hOw aRE baBieS maDe?"

"....."

My thoughts froze. I stood there, unable to say anything.

Next to us, Jeanne was also rendered speechless, but as soon as she regained her senses, she directed an angry outburst at Kili.

"Hey! Kili, you are being a bad influence on Zwei!"

"What are you talking about? Can't you just teach her properly?"

"Shut up!"

Amid the commotion, I heard a tiny rumble.

Following the sound, I saw Vritra, who had not participated in the dialogue so far, rubbing her stomach.

When our eyes met, Vritra spoke to hide her surprise.

"...I care not about any of this, but could ye all hasten the journey back? I am hungry."

Part 4

The next day—

"Kyah, Jeanne-samaaaaa!"

"Enough of this!"

Jeanne roared while dashing desperately on the road to school. A large group of rabid fan girls were chasing after her, creating rising dust clouds.

This scene was reminiscent of a certain television show I watched long ago.

Left at the dorm entrance, we watched with sympathy as Jeanne ran away.

"It must be tough for Jeanne-chan..."

Iris murmured emotionally and Mitsuki nodded.

"Yes—But we have no choice but to let Jeanne-san go first. We have no means of driving away the students blocking the dorm entrance. Yesterday, we made use of a back entrance... But a similar solution will not work for going to school."

Mitsuki deemed this the ideal solution but Ariella had doubts.

"Eh? But all of Midgard's important facilities are linked by underground passages, right? Can't we use them?"

"Underground passages are meant for emergency use. Furthermore, they are under repairs from the damage incurred during last time's battle, so none of them are open right now."

"Hmm... Sorry for all kinds of things, I guess."

Ariella shrank away and apologized.

Durign the battle last time, Ariella had taken NIFL's side and invaded the school while destroying partitions along the underground passages.

"—Ariella-san, you have already written your repentance essays, so there is no need for further apologies. I really wish Kili-san could learn well from you."

Mitsuki looked at Kili with a wry smile.

"I have been staying up late every night writing them too! There are so many that I can't finish! At this rate, I won't ever be able to pay Yuu visits at night!"

Kili argued unhappily.

"Serves you right. Also, even once you are finished with your essays, you are not allowed to make night visits either."

Mitsuki warned solemnly then glared back sharply at Kili.

"Mama iSn't wAlkiNg wiTh mE agAin toDay..."

Holding my hand, Shion looked sadly in Jeanne's direction.

"Yeah... Well, I don't think this commotion will last too long. Just bear with it for a while."

I stroked Shion's head and said optimistically but someone tugged at my shirt hem from behind.

I looked back to see Ren looking up at me regretfully.

"Onii-chan, unfortunately—It's getting worse."

Saying that, Ren showed me the screen of her portable terminal, which had posts like "Jeanne-sama is the best!" or "Jeanne-sama is currently heading to school."

"What is this...?"

"It's an internal community site created by Midgard graduates back when they were students here. It's full of stuff about Jeanne."

Ren scrolled the screen, showing the content about Jeanne. Firill was also looking at the screen from behind us.

"—So it's true. So much activity. If this continues, rather than subsiding, things might get even more heated instead."

Hearing Firill's comment, Shion said with flowing tears, "tHIs wiLl kEeP goInG...?"

"Come on, stop saying things to make Shion worry!"

Having cared for Shion as her senior earlier, Tia scolded Firill with arms akimbo.

"S-Sorry..."

Firill apologized.

"Firill-san, you have been admonished," said Lisa while smiling wryly.

"—However, optimism isn't going to bring about a solution. We need to think of something."

Lisa spoke with a solemn expression but she simply repeated Kili's suggestion of "not wearing male clothes" from yesterday. However, Jeanne herself had resisted vehemently.

And unless a solution was found, things would probably worsen as Firill had predicted.

The net around Jeanne closed tighter day by day.

After school the second day, girls started to ambush the back door, leaving Jeanne no choice but to escape through the jungle. However, she was met by another ambush at the dorm entrance.

Jeanne's gallant escape attempts ended up increasing her popularity instead. Chasing her had turned into an event itself.

At some point, a rumor started spreading among the girls that the first person to catch her would be able to go out with her. Those who believed this started to use their D powers indiscriminately.

Against shared intel on the community site combined with the mobility of flight-capable Ds, Jeanne was definitely cornered.

Seeing the girls progress so rapidly, Mitsuki remarked with honest poignancy, "I might lose in anti-personnel combat in the future."

But for Jeanne, there was no time for poignant reactions.

On the fifth day of her transfer—Jeanne managed just barely to get home in time for dinner today.

Dragging her body, all covered with twigs and leaves, she looked rather haggard while eating dinner.

—I must do something. But... what?

Lying on my bed after dinner, I contemplated.

My room was on the far end of the corridor. Since the only adjacent room had turned into Firill's book storage, it was always quiet around this hour of the day.

Living in the floor above, Mitsuki never made any loud noises, so there was nothing to disrupt my thoughts.

—The problem was that Jeanne personally rejecting their advances had been completely futile.

Due to the collective mentality, the girls had gone out of control, ignoring Jeanne's own wishes. Persuading with logic and reason was probably out of the question.

In that case, a certain action was the only option left...

Just as my thoughts reached that point, I heard a knocking at my door.

"Who is it?"

I sat up and directed my voice at the door. Was it Vritra again?

"...Captain, it's me, Jeanne. I need to talk to you about something."

Unexpectedly, it was Jeanne's voice.

I had been thinking about her problem all this time. Since the person in question had showed up, there was no reason to reject her.

"Sure, no problem. I'll open the door for you."

I got off the bed and walked to the door. Back when it was just Mitsuki and I living in this dorm, I basically never locked the door. Since Mitsuki held the master key, locking was pointless.

However, now that the number of residents had increased all at once, with people among them whom I must be careful with—well, mainly Kili—I currently had the door locked.

"Sorry, it is already this late..."

After I opened the door, Jeanne bowed her head at me in apology. She was carefully holding a transparent plastic bag in her arms.

"No, I don't mind. But is it okay for you to leave Shion alone?"

"Zwei was already very sleepy, so I had her brush her teeth and go to bed."

"Then it should be fine. Come—please enter."

"P-Pardon the intrusion..."

Nervously, Jeanne stepped into the room.

I sat down on the edge of the bed in the back of the room. Jeanne looked around aimlessly.

"Sit over there."

I pointed at the chair by my desk.

"I-It's okay, I am fine standing here."

However, Jeanne shook her head and stood in front of me.

"Well, if that's your preference, Jeanne—What do you want to talk about? Does it have anythiing to do with what you're carrying?"

I pointed at the plastic bag that she seemed quite conscious of. Jeanne nodded.

"Yes, indeed! Actually—this was the school uniform issued to me initially."

Saying that, Jeanne took out the contents.

Indeed, it was Midgard's uniform. Furthermore, it was a female uniform.

"But I didn't wear it because it was too embarrassing... So I requested a male uniform like yours, Captain. However..."

"In order to change the current situation, you've made up your mind to wear a female uniform?"

When I asked that, Jeanne shook her head.

"Umm... No, I still haven't made up my mind, which is why I came to discuss with you, Captain... Last time when you said this uniform would look good on me... I denied it... Oh, no, I know you were joking at the time... But—"

"I wasn't joking, by the way... Why did you think I was joking?"

I frowned and asked Jeanne. I did not know the reason for her inferiority complex.

"Hmm—I've always dressed as a man and worked hard like a man... It must be very weird for someone like that to suddenly dress up as a girl, deserving of ridicule..."

Hearing that from Jeanne, I sighed deeply.

"What are you talking about? Jeanne, you're very pretty, so it won't be weird at all."

"Ah!? Very... pretty!?"

Jeanne exclaimed in surprise and her face turned bright red. Her massive reaction made me embarrassed too.

"How should I say this...? It's the objective truth. The girls like you so much."

Scratching my head, I replied apologetically.

"Ehhh!? Aren't they drawn to the manliness I've developed over the years...?"

"Uh, Jeanne... I'm sorry I have to tell you this, but—"

I told the truth to Jeanne who did not know herself.

"Back when we were working in the same team—You were a brave and intelligent subordinate. It might be okay to call this part as being like a man… But as for manliness, to be honest, you have none of that at all. You give off too strong a sense of purity."

"What—"

Speechless, Jeanne dropped the uniform in her hands. Seeing her more shocked than I expected, I hastily continued.

"N-Not being manly isn't a bad thing, right? That sense of purity lacking in men is precisely the key that makes you a handsome youth. And this aspect definitely works just as well when dressing up as an attractive woman too. You need to be confident!"

Holding Jeanne's shoulders, I tried my best to convince her.

Next, light shone from her eyes.

"…Captain, you're saying that, the way I am now… and dressed up as a woman too, would be attractive…?"

"Yes."

I looked her in the eye and nodded vigorously.

"Th-Then… Is it okay for you to look at me in female uniform and tell me if I look weird or not?"

"Of course—Eh, right here?"

I nodded on reflex then gasped.

"Yes… I will change in the washroom…"

Picking up the uniform on the ground, Jeanne peered at me face with a blush.

The atmosphere in the room turned bittersweet.

While saying "oh sure," I nodded stiffly in response.

"Please wait, Captain."

Saying that, Jeanne went into the washroom. Inside the quiet room, I could hear faint sounds from the washroom.

—What am I getting nervous for?

Sitting on the bed's edge, I scratched my head anxiously.

After what felt like an extremely long time, the washroom door opened. I could not help but straighten my back, waiting for Jeanne to emerge.

"……Jeanne?"

However, despite the opened door, she was nowhere to be seen.

"S-Sorry, I am a bit nervous… I-I am coming out now!"

Despite the determination in her voice, time went by and she still had not turned her words into action.

".....Jeanne?"

"S-Sorry! U-Umm... Could you close your eyes?"

I could not refuse this request delivered in a trembling voice.

"Sure, I got it," I said and closed my eyes.

After roughly ten seconds, I heard soft footsteps and the sound of friction in clothing.

Jeanne had finally exited the washroom, I guess. The footsteps stopped in front of me. Feeble breathing sounds could be heard clearly.

Judging from her breathing, Jeanne had never been this nervous before.

"Can I open my eyes now?"

Noting to myself how much this resembled hide-and-seek, I confirmed with Jeanne. Well—since she was moving from a hidden state to enter my presence, it would be the opposite of hide-and-seek.

"Yes, please go ahead."

Hearing Jeanne's stiff reply, I slowly opened my eyes.

Since it was sitting on the bed's edge, my vantage point was quite low. The first thing I saw was her skirt and the pale thighs extending from underneath—

"I-I can't do this after all!"

However, my vision was blocked then. Lunging forward, Jeanne covered my eyes.

"Woah!?"

With that, I was pushed back onto the bed. Pinning me down, Jeanne continued to cover my eyes with her hands.

"Ah, wawawa, w-what am I doing to the Captain—S-Sorry! I am terribly sorry!"

"I-If you really mean it, hurry and back away!"

The soft sensations coming through her clothing was undoubtedly a woman's. I was well aware that my face must be bright red.

"I-I can't! If I back away, you will see me, Captain!"

"Like I said, it will be fine!"

I grabbed Jeanne's hands and forced them away from my face.

"Wah!?"

Jeanne screamed but since her hands were in my clutches, she could not escape.

My gaze settled on Jeanne in her female uniform.

This outfit emphasized what the male uniform could not—her ample bust, narrow waist and the pale thighs exposed beneath her skirt.

"Ah, wa, wa..."

With her mouth gaping open, Jeanne's face turned pink like the color of a fully ripened peach. With her usual ponytail untied and tears welling up in her eyes, she looked exceptionally adorable.

Also—

"—See, what a pretty girl as expected."

I looked up at the panicking Jeanne and told her in reassurance.

"Huh!?"

But under these circumstances, it seemed to have the opposite effect. Jeanne's face began to boil while her tears started to fall.

"S-Sorry! I didn't mean to make you cry—"

I frantically released her hands and apologized.

"...No, th-these are... tears of joy. I am relieved... Captain, that you don't find me weird... Also, umm, it is embarrassing after all... Oh, e-excuse me!"

Jeanne wiped her tears and seemed to recover. She hastily escaped from me.

Clutching the hem of her skirt shyly, she kept apologizing with her head bowed.

"Sorry, I am so sorry! I clearly came to seek your counsel, Captain, but ended up causing so much trouble... What could I ever do to make up..."

"Don't worry about that. We're no longer superior and subordinate."

I said that but Jeanne did not accept.

"I still mind even if you say that! Please punish me—Please impose punishment upon me!"

"By punishment... You mean like getting spanked?"

Out of ideas, I joked as a test.

However, Jeanne suddenly fell silent, turning around while holding her skirt down.

"My bottom... huh. A-As you wish."

Seeing Jeanne trembling while bending over and lifting her bottom, my mind blanked out.

"N-No! That's not what I intended—!"

"Eh...!? Don't tell me you want me to roll up my skirt too!? Umm, actually, I forgot to bring female underwear... Oh no, that's wrong, I do have some prepared in my room—But right now, I'm not wearing any—"

"What..."

After learning the reason why Jeanne was holding down her skirt, I could not help but look at the boundary between her skirt and those pale thighs. Under there was—

"Umm, if it's the Captain's orders, I shall...!"

Blushing intensely, Jeanne was about to roll up her skirt.

"Stop, stop, stop! It's fine, it's fine!"

I frantically reached out to stop her.

However, while pushing down her skirt, my hand also grabbed her bottom through the fabric at the same time.

The unimaginable softness was transmitted through my hand—At the same time, Jeanne's body kept shaking.

"Mmm—C-Captain—This is kind of sudden—"

"S-Sorry!"

I mobilized the entirety of my sanity to make my hand release Jeanne's skirt.

But looking back while holding her bottom, Jeanne shook her head with a blush.

"No, I don't mind, this is punishment, so I am fine with it. Umm... Is that all?"

Looking up at me, Jeanne's eyes seemed to be hoping for something, but surely, that must have been a delusion born from my lustful thoughts.

"...Oh, yeah, that's all. So, you have to do your best tomorrow."

To put Jeanne at ease, I played my captain role and encouraged her in a firm tone of voice.

Since Jeanne called what happened a punishment, there was no need for me to go out of my way to correct her.

"Very well—I understand! Thank you very much!"

Saluting to me, Jeanne fled to the washroom, picked up her male uniform in her arms and ran out of my room.

"Phew—"

I exhaled deeply and lay down on my bed.

The soft sensation was still lingering clearly on my hand.

Despite my exhaustion, it looked like I was still going to have trouble falling asleep tonight.

While looking up at the familiar ceiling, I hoped that today's efforts could buy tomorrow's success in return.

Part 5

"Wow! Jeanne-chan is so cute!"

"So surprised! Tia couldn't recognize you for a moment!"

The next morning—Seeing Jeanne at the dining hall dressed in the female uniform, Iris and Tia cheered.

"A dramatic makeover—Nevertheless, it is adorable and splendid indeed."

"Unexpectedly... big."

Lisa remarked with emotion while Firill kept staring at Jeanne's chest and narrowed her eyes suggestively.

Mitsuki nodded in acknowledgement and placed her hand on her own chest.

"Yes, definitely big, so envi—C-Cough, hmm, J-Jeanne-san, binding your chest forcibly is bad for your health, you know?"

Halfway through, Mitsuki came to her senses and reminded Jeanne solemnly.

"That's true. Maybe you shouldn't bind your chest when wearing male clothes in the future."

"Mm, I agree, otherwise it's a shame."

Ariella and Ren agreed with Mitsuki's viewpoint.

"—Understood, I will take your advice to heart. So I don't look weird, right?"

Jeanne sought the opinion of the girls and spun around on the spot. My heart raced when her skirt fluttered but I would expect her to be wearing underwear properly right now.

Forgetting to wear underwear to school was probably a mistake only Iris would make.

"Yes, no problem. But Jeanne-chan, what changed your mind? You were so embarrassed previously..."

Kili asked in surprise.

"Well—Naturally, it's because I want to commute to and from school together with Zwei and the Captain. Causing commotions like this the whole time, I can't even enter the cafeteria."

"Mama..."

Jeanne smiled at Shion but she seemed quite conscious of the shortness of her skirt.

"I still feel a bit bashful... but since the Captain said it looked fine, I will surely step out and walk openly."

Jeanne looked at me with warm eyes.

"Oh? ...So Nii-san already saw Jeanne-san in this attire beforehand."

Mitsuki looked at me accusingly.

"Oh right, she showed it to me last night when we had a discussion."

With a bad feeling, I nodded stiffly. I looked at Jeanne, hoping to convey to her not to say anything unnecessary, but I had totally dug my own grave.

"Captain—Sorry for embarrassing myself before you last night."

Making eye contact with me, Jeanne apologized. Seeing this, Kili frowned lightly.

"Embarrassing yourself huh? So it appears you two were doing something together."

"It was a great failure of unspeakable proportions. However, instead of punishing me harshly, the Captain simply applied a gentle touch—or rather, a grab, before letting me off."

Blushing, Jeanne exhaled hot breath.

"What dost thou mean by 'a grab'?"

Next, Vritra, who had been eating breakfast quietly, questioned harshly.

"Well—"

"Jeanne, don't—"

I frantically tried to stop her but it was too late.

"He grabbed my bottom."

When Jeanne revealed the answer, I was bathed under the icy gazes from everyone.

"Wait, there were many reasons for that..."

"No matter what reasons you had, Nii-san, the quantity of repentance essays shall not change."

Despite my intention to explain, Mitsuki had already mercilessly ordered the submission of repentance essays.

Misunderstandings were definitely something that must be cleared up on the spot. I was made painfully aware of this lesson.

After breakfast, which felt as though I was sitting on a bed of nails, it was finally time for Jeanne to head off to school in her female uniform.

A great number of girls had gathered outside the entrance. Standing at the entrance hall, I could already hear the commotion outside.

"Well then, Captain, I will head out first to show everyone my current look."

Jeanne spoke with determination on her face

"Ah yes, good luck."

Having lost my standing completely in the earlier incident, I could only wave and see her out the door.

When the automatic door at the entrance opened, the girls' cheering flooded in.

However, the instant Jeanne stepped out the door, the cheering turned into the noise of confusion—then silence gradually spread.

Sure enough, Jeanne in female attire had delivered an intense shock to them.

Despite changing her clothing, Jeanne remained beautiful as always. Hence, she should not be mistaken for someone else. She was simply born with the requisite elements for handsome youths and beautiful maidens.

Surprised by this, the girls would soon come to realize Jeanne's true charm.

—Hmm? Uh… Was that really okay?

I discovered there was a problem in my logic somewhere.

I seemed to have missed something, but this answer was swiftly revealed too.

"Kyahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!! Jeanne-samaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!"

The unprecedented yelling echoed in the surroundings, shaking the air.

"Papa!?"

Frightened by the noise, Shion hugged me tightly at the waist.

Engulfed by overwhelming cheering, Jeanne was rooted to the spot in shock.

"Jeanne-sama! You changed into a girl's uniform today!"

"So beautiful! I've fallen in love with you all over again!"

"Umm, may I have a photo with you—"

"No matter which look, Jeanne-sama is always the best!"

Eyes bloodshot with excitement, the girls all pushed towards Jeanne.

"H-How did it turn out like this!?"

Kicking against the dorm wall, Jeanne jumped out, escaping the instant before the tide of girls devoured her.

"—Sorry Zwei, we can't go to school together today either!"

Yelling in despair, Jeanne ran at full speed.

"Jeanne-sama! Please wait for us—!"

Chasing after Jeanne, the girls looked completely the same as usual.

Just as I had told Jeanne last night, she was very attractive regardless which gender she dressed up as. Furthermore, the girls all knew she was female to begin with. Hence, they were not going to be disillusioned even if Jeanne were to wear female clothing. I should have thought of that.

On further thought, back when I was cross-dressing during the school festival, the girls were also inexplicably excited.

"It failed..."

Iris murmured in disappointment.

"...Mama iS gOne."

Very looking forward to today, Shion now looked like she was about to cry.

Looking at Shion, I mustered my resolve.

It was too naive to expect this commotion to end once Jeanne stopped wearing male clothing.

Frankly speaking, I had thought of another solution but I made the call on my own that there was no need to go that far. However—

"Don't worry, Shion. Mama will definitely go to school with you tomorrow."

I stroked her soft hair and declared.

"...rEaLLy?"

"Yes, I promise you."

I nodded firmly and committed myself to ending this commotion tomorrow.

Part 6

Roughly twenty-four hours later...

A large crowd of girls were gathered in front of the dorm like yesterday.

"Captain, you really have a solution?"

Hearing the noisy clamor outside the entrance, Jeanne asked uneasily.

Since yesterday's solution had failed miserably, Jeanne had switched back to her male uniform today. However, following Mitsuki and the others' advice, she did not bind her chest. Nevertheless, coming from inside the male uniform, the bulge of her ample bust presented an unusual sense of allure. Still, now was not the time to be faltering.

"Yes, leave it to me."

I promised firmly and walked to the automatic door together with Jeanne.

"Do your best, Mononobe!"

"Take care, Nii-san."

Iris and the girls watched over us from the entrance hall.

"Papa....."

"Don't worry, you'll definitely be able to go to school with Mama today."

I waved to the worried Shion and exited the dorm with Jeanne.

As usual, the cheering started.

However, to suppress the girls' cries of "Jeanne-sama!", I took a step forward and glared at them.

The girls suddenly stopped with hesitation on their faces.

"Oh, umm, Yuu-sama... What's the matter?"

One girl asked nervously.

Rather than fearing me, it looked more like they were unsure what to do. After making eye contact with me, all of them turned red and looked lost.

Like what Lisa had said—getting involved with me, a genuine man, required committed resolve from these girls. That was why they had pounced on Jeanne, a choice that needed neither resolve nor hesitation.

However, I had to put an end to this. Even if it brought resentment from the girls—

"Sorry, but could you stop this kind of excessive pursuit? You're really bothering Jeanne."

"N-No way... We're only—"

The girls complained but I interrupted them and announced in a forceful tone of voice.

"You have objections, right? But I will protect Jeanne from now on. Don't even think of touching even Jeanne's finger while I'm here."

Saying that, I held Jeanne's shoulder and pulled her towards me.

"C-Captain!?"

Turning red, Jeanne was very shaken, but she must endure right now.

I had to demonstrate for certain right here that approaching Jeanne meant getting involved with me. If I did that, most girls would feel afraid and that would reduce their pursuit of Jeanne.

Becoming an obstacle for them, I would be a target of contempt, right...? But it could not be avoided. Compared to my own reputation, Shion's smile was more important.

However, I noticed that the surrounding girls were acting strangely.

I expected them to direct hostility at me, but they were staring at Jeanne and me while blushing.

"...Nice."

The girl directly in front of me suddenly started to murmur with a fervent expression.

Next, the other girls began to whisper with their neighbors with blushing faces.

"Yes, it's wonderful..."

"What is up with this kind of feeling...?"

"Seeing Yuu-sama and Jeanne-sama pressed together, why do I feel my chest tighten—"

"Don't you get it, everyone? This is..."

"Ehhh—No way! But definitely..."

"To be able to see this kind of scene in real life—"

The whispering gradually grew louder as the girls got excited on their own.

"H-Hey...?"

A subtle chill ran along my back. I called out in trepidation.

Next, the girls suddenly stopped. After saying "Excuse us! From now on, we'll watch over you two from afar!", they all took off together.

Left behind, Jeanne and I watched, rooted to the spot, while they departed.

"Captain, did we succeed?"

"I-I guess. But what's with this annoying premonition?"

"Hmm... I feel it too."

Then Firill, who had stayed inside the entrance hall to observe the situation, came over and patted me on the shoulder.

"You have opened a new door for everyone. Mononobe-kun plus cross-dressing Jeanne... This combination is a bit too stimulating."

"W-What door—"

Instead of answering, Firill smiled mysteriously.

"Papa! Mama!"

However, Shion hugged me from behind so I left things at that for now.

With the excited Shion holding our hands, Jeanne and I walked to school together.

Incidentally, my question would be cleared up a week later—When I found out that a self-published work based on Jeanne and me, written in aesthetic style, had leaked out.

Chapter 03 – Festival of Vivid Colors

Part 1

'Everyone—I'm thinking of holding a festival!'

Without any warning, this voice suddenly resounded throughout the school during lunch break.

Eating lunch at the cafeteria, we of Brynhildr Class looked up because of the familiar voice.

"It's the principal's voice..."

In the middle of eating spaghetti, Lisa paused and whispered in surprise.

"She is full of surprises as always."

"Mm... I feel trouble coming."

Ariella and Ren agreed and sighed.

The other students in the surroundings were listening to the announcement with troubled expressions.

'—The school festival held last time was aimed mainly at parties external to Midgard, but this time, the goal is to allow you all to enjoy yourselves. There must be many people who were unsettled by NIFL's inspection. This festival is being held to reward you and help you relax. As a result, preparations and operations will be undertaken by staff including myself. Students, all you need to do is wait for the festival to arrive.'

"Oh? ...It sounds like good news, quite unexpectedly. Well done for the principal."

Firill remarked poignantly while wiping the ketchup on the corner of her mouth from eating omlet rice.

'However, there are apparently students who wish to set up shop like during the school festival. In that case, all you need to do is apply for permission to open shop from your homeroom teacher. We will permit anything as long as it is nothing bizarre.'

"Wow, we're allowed to open shop? Mononobe, what should we do? Should we do it?"

Iris asked me with a sparkling expression. Very clearly, she wanted to open one.

"Hmm, what should we do...? We just went through so much trouble, so I think we should just sit back and enjoy..."

However, I shared my contrary opinion with reservations.

The commotion centered on Jeanne had died down and peaceful days had finally arrived. To be honest, I just wanted to relax and enjoy myself.

'The application deadline will be three days from now, while festivities are scheduled to begin two weeks later. Well then, everyone, please look forward to the festival!'

Charl finished in a cheerful voice when the broadcast was suddenly ended, accompanied by static.

Somehow, it felt like Charl was the one who looked forward to it the most.

"—With the preparation time being not very long, it seems it would become very hectic. Just as Nii-san said, it would be better if we do not strain ourselves to open up a shop..."

Mitsuki sipped a mouthful of miso soup and concurred.

However, Shion asked a question.

"wHaT aRe feStiVitiEs oR schOOl fEstIvals...?"

Sitting on the side, Tia started to explain to Shion like a senior mentor.

"Although Tia doesn't know what ordinary festivities are like, school festivals are very fun. We ran a Japanese teahouse last time and practiced cooking... Then we also wore pretty kimonos and many customers came... It was really amazing last time, heart-thumping exciting! Tia also checked out other homeroom's shops with Yuu and the others, it was really fun!"

Tia spread her arms and gestured to express how fun the festival was.

Hearing all this, Shion's cheeks slowly turned red and her eyes glimmered.

"amAziNg—I waNnA tRy toO."

At that moment, I noticed a change in Mitsuki's expression.

Putting down her chopsticks, Mitsuki took out a small communicator from her uniform pocket.

"Mitsuki?"

I looked at her questioningly but Mitsuki began to make a call in a stiff tone of voice.

"—Shinomiya-sensei, this is an urgent call. Yes—You are right, I am contacting you regarding that. Shinomiya-sensei..... Is that so? Then I have something to inform you... Actually, Shion-san—"

It looked like she was calling Shinomiya-sensei.

With her hand over her mouth, Mitsuki was conversing with Shinomiya-sensei with her voice lowered.

"Why am I getting a bad feeling about this...? I hope this doesn't result in piling more trouble on top of repentance essays."

Looking at Mitsuki, Kili remarked hesitantly.

"I am very bored every day. A bit of trouble would not matter."

Vritra spooned curry while expressing her indifference.

The others looked at Mitsuki, curious about what was going to happen.

Finally finished, Mituski put down the communicator and addressed us.

"Just now, I obtained permission from Shinomiya-sensei to set up a shop. We will apparently discuss this during the self-study period in the afternoon."

Mitsuki's sudden announcement to open shop left us stunned on the spot.

The first to recover, Lisa asked Mitsuki.

"Mitsuki-san... Shouldn't we first talk about whether we are participating in the festival? And just now, you did not seem inclined towards running a shop..."

"Since Shion-san would like to run a shop, we have no choice. Let us enjoy the festival together."

After making herself clear, Mitsuki smiled at Shion.

"—yEs, iT seeMs veRy fuN."

Shion nodded happily. Her guardian, Jeanne, frantically spoke up.

"h, umm, although I'd like to fulfill Zwei's wish too—we don't have to go out of our way to set up a shop just for her sake, right? This would cause too much trouble for you all, and spoiling her too much would be bad for her future education..."

Seeing Jeanne worry about us, I was slightly surprised.

Jeanne was probably in full support of the idea, but she was also considerate of Shion and everyone else. Instead of indulging Shion indiscriminately, she was treating her with a mother's responsibility.

—Jeanne was playing the role of "Mama" dutifully.

This was something I must learn properly. Although we had no blood relation, I was Shion's "Papa" of sorts.

Mitsuki also looked a little surprised but she instantly nodded and replied.

"No problem. Although participation is organized by homeroom, it is not compulsory. Everyone aside from me may join in voluntarily, no need to worry too much."

After speaking seriously, Mitsuki looked at us seated around the dining table.

"Furthermore, I have confirmed with Shinomiya-sensei just now. It is also allowed to open a shop in cooperation with staff. We coud participate in the form of assisting Shinomiya-sensei's shop, which would greatly reduce our burden. So, everyone—I hope you will consider it carefully."

Mitsuki placed her hand on the table and gazed seriously at all of us.

Always serious and giving her full effort in all her endeavors, Mitsuki was pouring in a different kind of passion this time.

Since Jeanne had always been the one taking care of Shion, I had not noticed until now, but Mitsuki also seemed very devoted to Shion's matters.

Shion was the orphan of Shinomiya Miyako, Mitsuki's best friend.

Hence, Mitsuki would feel extra concerned about Shion's matters. However, I could sense from Mitsuki's expression more than tender affection. There was also a strong sense of responsibility.

"Shion-san, please leave everything to me."

Anyone could see that the smiling Mitsuki was very reliable.

However, compared to Jeanne who was conscious of her maternal role, Mitsuki still felt insecure regarding her own position that had yet to be defined—

Part 2

Just as Mitsuki had said, fifth period's self-study turned into a discussion about the upcoming festival.

Standing at the lectern, our homeroom teacher Shinomiya-sensei looked at us in our seats and said:

"Ehh... The following is information disclosed only to those involved in opening shops, so I hope all of you will maintain confidentiality—This festival will be held using Japan's fireworks celebrations as a motif."

Shinomiya-sensei explained while showing scenes from Japanese festivals and the setting off of fireworks on the classroom monitor.

Watching these, everyone went "wow" in admiration.

These scenes could be seen every year in Japan but for me, it had been a long time ago. When was the last time I ever saw fireworks—

While searching through the memories Tia had helped recover for me, the first image to surface in my mind turned out to be the side view of young Mitsuki's face instead.

It was probably the summer four years ago, a memory from when the two of us had taken a train to the neighboring town to check out a fireworks festival.

However, the side view of Mitsuki's face left a much deeper impression in my memory than the fireworks, because during that instant, illuminated by the light, she was so extremely beautiful—

Recalling the memory from that time, I looked at Mitsuki on my right.

"!?"

When our gazes suddenly met, I frantically turned to look ahead. I don't suppose Mitsuki was recalling memories from four years ago too?

Showing an overhead map of Midgard, Shinomiya-sensei continued to explain.

"—According to the plan, shops will be set up along the coastal road while fireworks will be shot from the sea surface. Since the principal insists on Japanese style, the shops will recreate the look of Japanese night market vendors. Furthermore, I will be in charge of a yakisoba stall."

The monitor showed a detailed photo of a yakisoba stall.

"...Hmm, that looks about right."

I heard Vritra's whisper.

She was always keeping a poker face but whenever food was mentioned, she would pay more attention.

"Mononobe Mitsuki has proposed helping out at my stall together with Shion. However—according to the principal's wishes, this is a festival held to reward you. If you wish to enjoy the festival from the vendor side no matter what, all you need to do is assist at my shop."

Saying that, Shinomiya-senseii looked at us.

Lisa raised her hand next and asked.

"Excuse me—what sort of assistance in particular? I have never made yakisoba before..."

"Indeed... We staff will be in charge of preparations, so all you need to do is help out at the stall on the day of the festival. Those who cannot cook can be in charge of serving customers. Shifts can also be limited to the daytime when it is the most busy. During the fireworks celebration at night, you can go and enjoy yourselves freely."

Hearing Shinomiya-sensei's reply, Lisa nodded.

"Then I have no further questions. I shall help out as well. However, since it is a rare opportunity, I would like to learn how to prepare yakisoba too."

Looking like an idea occurred to her, Shinomiya-sensei made a suggestion.

"Hmm—let us have a barbecue this coming weekend and I shall teach you how to make Shinomiya-style yakisoba. You won't be able to practice properly unless you cook on an iron griddle for real."

"Wonderful! A barbecue! It'll be the first time since Tia's arrival!"

Iris cheered and looked at me.

"—Yeah, that was the time when Charl brought barbecue stuff along."

I nodded nostalgically.

It was a special day when Tia had gotten familiar with the class for real. It felt like a really long time ago.

"Shinomiya-sensei, you must be busy currently, right?"

Mitsuki asked with concern. As the student council president, she was well aware of Shinomiya-sensei's heavy workload.

"Yes, but I believe I can still squeeze out the time. In addition, consider this a reward for your assistance."

Shinomiya-sensei smiled wryly. Next, sitting in the left seat on the front row, Firill looked back and smiled.

"In that case... Those who don't help out won't be eligible to join the barbecue. I'll help too, what about everyone else?"

"Of course I'll help."

"Mm, me too."

"Tia has decided to help from the start!"

Ariella, Ren and Tia instantly responded to Firill's question.

"Oh, me too! What about you, Mononobe?"

A moment slower, Iris raised her hand frantically then asked me.

"I'll help too—I wouldn't want to miss the barbecue."

After I nodded, everyone's gaze fell upon the remaining Jeanne, Vritra and Kili.

"Huh...? When Shion offered to help, I already decided to do it together..."

Jeanne answered blankly and Vritra nodded deeply.

"I shall offer mine assistance. I am interested in yakisoba. 'Twould be possible to replicate it perfectly using dark matter if I knew the exact cooking procedure."

Vritra replied seriously. Perhaps her failure in replicating ice cream properly last time had been bothering her a lot.

Then only Kili remained—

"Kili-chan, join us too! It'll be lonely to watch the barbecue without taking part, right?"

When Iris finished, Kili nodded lightly.

"No helping it... If Yuu's doing it, so will I. But let me make myself clear, I won't feel lonely even if my companions abandon me."

Insisting that, Kili stared at me.

"ShiNoMiya-stYle yakisoba. i WanNa leArN it."

Amidst everything, Shion quietly motivated herself and clenched her tiny fist tightly.

Part 3

Located near the equator, Midgard was hot all year round.

As a result, most people basically spent the majority of their time indoors in air-conditioning. The uniforms designed for this lifestyle were extremely hot when worn outdoors—which was why very few people would wear the uniform outdoors except during their commute to and from school.

And... on holidays where uniforms were not required, things would be completely different.

"Great, it's sunny today."

Using my hand to shield my eyes from the sun's powerful rays, I looked at the blue sky.

There were virtually no clouds for miles around in the sunny sky. There was also very little wind. The sea was calm.

Normally in such heat, I would rush indoors, but having changed to swimwear, the current temperature was just right.

At the seaside, Iris and Tia were playing in the water, similarly dressed in swimwear. The ones swimming in the sea were probably Lisa and Mitsuki. On the other hand, Firill was reading under a parasol.

"—How do I put this? It feels like a day off has finally arrived."

Approaching me from behind, Ariella came to my side and said slowly.

"Well, after the fighting ended, there were so many things preventing us from relaxing."

I smiled wryly and agreed with Ariella.

Wearing a bikini, Ariella was generously displaying her svelte and tender body under the sun. The tropical-themed swimsuit was an excellent match for the beach where it was summer all year long.

Ariella's narrow waist and slender legs were strongly alluring and I could not help but feel my gaze drawn to them.

"Oh—Mononobe-kun, w-what are you staring at?"

Keenly noticing my gaze, Ariella blushed and covered up her thigh area with her hands. However, trying to cover up when wearing a swimsuit was not very effective while her embarrassed look actually added to the allure.

"Nothing, umm, I didn't mean to—"

I scratched my head while my gaze wandered. Ariella smiled wryly.

"Didn't you mention before that you found my legs attractive, Mononobe-kun…? Looks like you were being honest."

"You didn't believe me?"

That time, I was sent to repentance essay hell for speaking my mind. It would be so not worth it if she did not even believe me.

"I thought it was partially a joke… But after seeing your reaction, Mononobe-kun, I believe you. You do treat me properly as a girl."

"…That goes without saying."

Ariella's very happy smile made me blush.

Seeing my response, Ariella became embarrassed and lowered her reddened face.

"Mm—Onii-chan."

Someone suddenly grabbed my hand, surprising me. By the time I noticed, Ren was already standing next to me. Instead of the one-piece swimsuit I had seen before, she was wearing a more revealing set of pink swimwear separates.

"What's up, Ren?"

"What about... me? Do I count as a girl to you, Onii-chan?"

Ren looked at me seriously and asked. She must have overheard my conversation with Ariella.

Ariella looked a little panicked and grabbed Ren's shoulders from behind while she said to me:

"Mononobe-kun, you must answer properly, okay? Ren is our younger sister, but before that, she is also a girl."

She was encouraging Ren from an older sister's standpoint, demanding me to give a sincere answer.

"Well—of course I know that. Ren too, umm... I do think of you as a proper girl."

Saying that, I began to stroke Ren's head to hide my embarrassment.

However, Ren grabbed my hand and continued to question.

"Then what's my charm point?"

"Umm... V-Very cute... something like that."

I felt reluctant to say it face to face, but I still endured my embarrassment and voiced it out.

"Mm... That's a bit ambiguous. Be more specific."

Ren suddenly went red but she still shook her head, not yet satisfied.

In other words, I needed to point out what was cute about Ren, like how I had called Ariella's legs attractive.

"R-Right... Ren, your hair is a very pretty red. It's silky smooth and I find it very attractive."

"...That's it?"

"A-Also—There are your cheeks, for example."

When I said that, Ren tilted her head in surprise.

"Cheeks?"

"Yeah... Umm, you tend to pout when you're unhappy, right? That look is strangely adorable. Your cheeks look so soft that it makes me really want to poke them..."

Wondering why the heck I had to explain this, I answered honestly.

"...It's the first time anyone told me this."

Ren placed her hand on face doubtfully.

"Mononobe-kun, you were a bit perverted there."

Ariella looked at me in shock.

"Mm, Onii-chan is a... maniac."

Seeing Ren agree with her, I slumped my shoulders.

"...It's impossible to argue against that here."

Holding my hand, Ren proceeded to bring it to her cheek.

"However, because it's you, Onii-chan... I allow you, just a bit."

Ren pressed my fingertip against her face and looked up at me.

Her cheek was very soft and elastic, it felt even better than I had imagined.

"Wow..."

While I was immersed in poking her cheek, Ren suddenly turned red.

Rather than caused by friction, Ren's face had gone red from embarrassment.

"O-Onii-chan... When are you going to stop?"

"Oh—Sorry, I accidentally got too into it."

Coming to my senses, I took my hand away. Exhaling hot breath, Ren held her cheeks.

"You are a manic as expected, Onii-chan. But... in that case, I too—"

Blushing, Ren began to murmur then turned around and ran to the water's edge.

"R-Ren! You need to do proper warm-ups before entering the water!"

Ariella ran after her frantically. Left behind, I felt an inexplicable sense of guilt and sighed.

"I guess I'll go for a swim too..."

I was going to head to the water's edge for a change of pace. But at that moment, the rest of my companions who had been staying in the dorm arrived.

The four of them, Kili, Vritra, Jeanne and Shion had taken slightly longer to change.

Dressed in a bold swimsuit, Kili was holding the hand of the not-too-pleased Vritra. What displeased Vritra was probably the school swimsuit with "Vritra" written across the chest. Judging from the situation, it was surely a prank on Kili's part.

The other mother-daughter combo had the mother leading the daughter by the hand.

"Z-Zwei, slower please—I am not ready yet—"

"i cAn't wAit."

Wearing a yellow swimsuit, Jeanne was desperately trying to cover up her chest and lower abdomen. As a result, she was walking even slower than the young Shion.

Clad in a one-piece swimsuit, Shion waved as soon as she saw me and ran across the white beach.

"Papa!"

"Uwahhhhhhhhh!? C-Captain! P-Please do not look at me!"

In stark contrast to the excited Shion, Jeanne wailed, almost about to burst into tears.

"—You don't need to hide yourself. You both look really good."

I smiled wryly at Shion and Jeanne who had arrived before me.

Slightly later, Kili arrived and grabbed Jeanne from behind, pinning her arms behind her back.

"Yes, Jeanne-chan is so pretty—Let him have a good look."

"K-Kili!? What are you doing—S-Stop it!"

Two well-shaped bulges entered my sight. Jeanne's struggle against Kili caused her twin peaks, wrapped in yellow fabric, to quiver seductively—I could not help but gulp.

"U-Unhand me! Ah—C-Captain, please don't stare at me—"

"O-Okay."

Obeying the blushing Jeanne, I averted my gaze.

Liberated from Kili, Vritra looked up at me in displeasure next.

"Thou seemest to love large chests. 'Twould explain thy lack of interest the previous occasion."

Vritra touched her flat chest and remarked with comprehension.

"N-No, that's not it—"

I frantically denied but someone caught my hand from the side, drawing my gaze.

"mY... chEsT is vEry sMall. Papa... diSliKes mE?"

Shion looked down at her own chest with extreme sadness. Noticing that I had brought on an unexpected misunderstanding, I bent down to look at Shion at eye-level.

"I don't dislike you, Shion, okay? Ignore what Vritra said."

"...thEn, yOu alSo loVe... sMall chEsTs?"

Shion's continued pursuit of the matter left me speechless. However, seeing her about to cry, I hastily replied.

"Yeah, big or small doesn't matter."

"biG oNes... sMall oNes... dOn'T maTtEr. bUt... Papa wAs stAriNg at Mama's chEsT. tHaT meAns Papa... loVeS chEsTs. yOu loVe... miNe toO?"

"Uh..."

Questioned by those innocent eyes, I felt cold sweat flowing down my face.

Although her question had a bit of a reverse sexual harrassment flavor to it, Shion clearly had no intention of that. Telling myself that there was no malicious meaning, I nodded.

"Y-Yeah, I love yours too."

Feeling like I had lost something that a human being should have protected to the bitter end, I answered. Shion finally looked relieved.

"thAnk GoOdneSs... i loVe yOu toO, Papa."

Stroking Shion's head while she was hugging me, I exhaled in relief.

"Hmm, in other words, thou hast desires for this body of mine too. 'Tis truly a relief that there are further opportunities to create deeper interaction."

However, this time, it was Vritra's turn to misinterpret my words and she leaned against me on the other side opposite to Shion. This further elicited misunderstandings from Jeanne and Kili.

"Yuu... Although I intended to accept your entire being, I do wish your fetishes weren't so twisted. I will accept nothing less than arousal towards my breasts, okay?"

"C-Captain, forget about Vritra, but please could you treat Shion properly as family! If you have pent-up needs, a-allow me to relieve them for you!"

Questioned by the two of them, I wanted to back away but with Shion and Vritra hugging me, I was unable to move.

"Calm down! Now isn't the time to discuss this!"

While shouting that, I used my arms to pick up Shion and Vritra respectively who were restraining me like shackles.

"Wa—Papa."

"Neun, what art thy intentions?"

With the two of them confused and carried in my arms, I fled the scene.

"Where are you going, Yuu!?"

"Captain, please stand still!"

Hearing Kili and Jeanne's voices behind me, I rushed towards Iris and the others on the beach.

After leaving Shion and Vritra with them, I began to escape into the sea. Things should have settled by the time Shinomiya-sensei arrived with the barbecue equipment.

Racing across the sand under the scorching sun, I prayed for things not to get any worse.

However—I had forgotten one thing.

Having left an understanding unexplained, the situation would only deteriorate further.

I swam in the deep blue sea in the mood to forget everything.

Swimming silently alone in the warm and comfortable seawater, I felt very calm.

Without swimming goggles, I could not look into the sea but I knew very well that all kinds of tropical fish were swimming in the surroundings.

Slight movement of my sluggish body brought a sense of fulfillment. The sun hanging in the sky allowed me to fully enjoy a swim in the sea.

But when I returned to the beach in contentment, I was confronted by the reality I had left hanging.

Shinomiya-sensei had showed up and everyone was starting to prepare the barbecue. Slightly farther away, Charl and Mica-san were staying under a parasol. The girls were probably chatting about the barbecue.

However, when Iris and the girls, who were happily preparing things, they all instantly shielded their chests at the sight of me.

"M-Mononobe... You're late."

"Oh, sorry about that. I wanted to go for a quick swim but it ended up taking longer. Uh... Why are you covering your chest?"

When I asked with a frown, Lisa answered on Iris' behalf.

"W-We know that you are the type of person who gets aroused by all manner of breasts regardless of size! A-Although I don't dislike your stares... Now that I know about it, I cannot help but feel conscious about it!"

Using two arms to guard her massive bust, Lisa stared at me shyly. Next to her, Firill cocked her head.

"Mononobe-kun's type of person... A worshiper of breasts? Eh... But aren't they limited to large ones?"

"Yuu is fine with big or small! As expected of Tia's husband!"

Tia exclaimed excitedly and Mitsuki nodded deeply in response.

"Indeed—the strike zone's breadth is something we need to review... However, Nii-san... It is truly insensitive to publicize your fetishes while we are in swimwear. In a certain way, this counts as sexual harassment."

Covering her small but well-shaped bosom, Mitsuki reminded me.

It looked like Shion had spread what I had said.

"No, umm—"

Thinking about how to clear up the misunderstanding, I started to speak.

But at that moment, I noticed a golden fairy approaching at full sprint from under the parasol.

"My friend——!"

She—Charl—removed her lab coat while running then jumped up high. Spinning in the air, she took off her red dress as well.

"H-Hey!?"

I panicked at the prospects of Charl getting naked, but a closer look revealed that she was wearing a micro bikini.

She proceeded to fly over Iris and the girls before hugging me forcefully.

"Mmm—"

The softness of her skin and the sweet fragrance shook my brain with a violent impact.

Standing on the shore, I was unable to stop Charl's momentum and we fell into the sea together.

My back crashed into the water. Falling over, face up, I saw waves splashing in the surroundings. Then my vision was immediately occupied by Charl with watery eyes.

"My friend, I finally get to see you! I finally get to see you!"

Charl was very excited. She grabbed my cheeks with her hands and rubbed them. However, she soon showed discontent in her expression.

"I... have been waiting for you the whole time, you know!? But you never came! Is this all that our friendship amounts to!?"

"Huh...? No—I only returned to Mitsuki's dorm a week or so, right?"

When I asked in confusion, Charl shook her head in surprise.

"Only a week? It's already a week. Ideally, I want to spend the night with you every two days—every three days if I'm busy—once a week is the absolute minimum!"

This declaration caused a great commotion to stir somewhere outside my sight.

"My body can no longer be satisfied without your presence! Ever night after work—My body heats up and it hurts. I want the the two of us to clash intensely!"

"Wait—S-Stop using such misleading descriptions! What you mean is playing against each other in games, right?"

Explaining myself to the others, I sought Charl's confirmation.

"Playing!? No—Isn't it an irreplaceable moment of intercourse that is unique between the two of us!? The feeling of spending time together till dawn, falling into depravity together... It is truly the highest pleasure without any substitute!"

"That's way too beautified a description of playing games until you drop!"

Pushing myself up, I sighed and retorted against Charl who was out of control.

"Huff... Well, I'm sorry. I should've visited at least."

When I stroked Charl's head, she nodded with excitement.

"Yes. I'm glad you understand. You must stay over in my room at least once every two days."

"—No. No more than once a week."

I made the greatest possible compromise and demanded her agreement.

"Fine... I'll endure it for now."

With great reluctance, Charl accepted my terms. Then she got off me. Her attire was quite a problem. Her chest and lower abdomen almost lacked the minimum of necessary cover. I did not know where to direct my gaze.

"By the way... Is it okay for you to go out in the daytime? Don't you need to avoid direct sunlight, Charl?"

Shaken by Charl's attire, I asked.

"Don't worry, I avoid sunlight because my skin color reverts very quickly after tanning, which would arouse suspicions around me. But since everyone here knows me, there's no need to be concerned about the sun."

Looking at Iris and the girls who were staring at us, she shrugged.

"So I will enjoy myself fully today! My friend, let's enjoy a feast together with lovely maidens!"

Saying that, Charl led me by the hand back to where the others were.

Iris and the girls were still guarding their chests, but since it was impossible to work like that, they lowered their arms while glancing at me.

"Mononobe-kun, please remember not to stare, okay? It's too dangerous to be distracted while using a kitchen knife."

"Mm... Onii-chan probably knows the proper time and place."

Warned by Ariella and Ren, I gave up on clearing the misunderstanding and replied "Got it."

"—Mononobe Yuu."

Shinomiya-sensei then walked towards me apologetically.

Like everyone else, she was wearing a swimsuit—However, my gaze was drawn to her undulating curves. Although I already knew she had a great figure, this far surpassed my imagination.

The navy-blue swimsuit, rather plain in comparison, was strongly emphasizing her voluptuous bust and seductive waist, impressing strongly upon me the feminine charm exuding from Shinomiya-sensei's body.

"Sh-Shinomiya-sensei... Umm, I—"

I stammered awkwardly, causing Shinomiya-sensei to cough with a blush.

"Sorry—I should have brought a jacket had I known your fetish... To think that my attire would seduce a student, I have failed as a teacher."

"No, not at all, please forget about that. It'd be a great help if you don't believe what the girls are saying."

Seeing Shinomiya-sensei reprimanding herself, I pleaded with her.

"In that case, the sight of a lady's chest doesn't provoke any thoughts in you."

Shinomiya-sensei murmured in relief, but I could not claim that was correct either.

"Umm—it would be difficult to have no thoughts at all. However, this isn't a special fetish, it's more like a trait common to all men..."

To prevent the misunderstanding from expanding further, I made a correction.

"Hmm, in any case, it is the same thing as being drawn to an attractive lady. Then I have nothing to be concerned about."

"Huh? Why is that?"

I could not help but ask Shinomiya-sensei, who had commented in a relaxed manner.

"I am not as attractive as they are, right?"

Shinomiya-sensei showed surprise then motioned with her gaze towards Iris and the girls who were in the middle of preparations.

"N-Not as attractive... That's not true at all."

Feeling that Shinomiya-sensei was too modest, I told her the truth.

"What—"

However, it looked like Shinomiya-sensei actually believed what she had said. She stared at me silently.

After staring at each other for a while, Shinomiya-sensei's face went red.

Perhaps I should not have said that to a teacher.

However, I had no choice but to correct her. Shinomiya-sensei lacking attractiveness was a statement that no man in the world could let slide.

Amid the awkward silence, the shaken Shinomiya-sensei covered her chest and spoke up.

"M-Mononobe Yuu, enough with the jokes. W-Well then, let us start making yakisoba."

"Yes, understood."

Shinomiya-sensei spoke with her entire body stiff. I also nodded awkwardly.

Although Shinomiya-sensei had forcibly changed the subject, the blush on her face still remained the whole time—

Part 4

About to cook yakisoba, we started cutting up vegetables and meat.

Shinomiya-sensei was in charge of instructing us, assisted by Mitsuki, a talented chef herself.

But once we actually started preparing the food, the two of them placed all their attention on Shion.

"Sh-Shion-san, cutting it like that would be too dangerous! When using a kitchen knife, you need to make a cat's paw with the fingers on your other hand to avoid cutting yourself..."

Mitsuki frantically stopped Shion from cutting the carrots, curling up her hand to demonstrate what she meant by a cat's paw.

"cAt? wHaT iS a cAt?"

However, Shion's curiosity seemed to be drawn elsewhere. Inquisitively, she asked Mitsuki.

"Ehhh!? A-A cat huh... They're quite fun, their paws are very cute... An animal that goes meow—"

"Meow?"

"That's right, meow meow, meow—"

"Meow—"

Very interested in the sound, Shion began to meow repeatedly. Mitsuki also went along with her, going "meow" nonstop.

Seeing the two of them like that, Shinomiya-sensei stopped in her food preparation and revealed a gentle expression that I had never seen before.

"Angels..."

I could fully understand what Shinomiya-sensei was feeling while she whispered that. The innocent Shion and Mitsuki going "meow" were extremely adorable, definitely a dazzling sight to behold.

However, if we were to lose ourselves in admiring this, the yakisoba was not going to get done no matter how much time went by.

"Shinomiya-sensei, I'm sorry—but please come back to reality."

I patted Shinomiya-sensei on the shoulder and she suddenly straightened herself in front of us.

"Uh, my apologies. I-I must demonstrate properly. First, chop the cabbage into appropriately sized shreds—"

Shinomiya-sensei coughed and resumed the demonstration, but kept pausing whenever Shion raised her voice.

When using the iron griddle to fry the noodles, Jeanne suggested not to be overprotective when Shinomiya-sensei was worrying that it would be dangerous for Shion.

"She won't be able to endure hardship in the future if you stop her from doing it just because it's dangerous. I wish for Zwei to become strong. L-Like... th-the Captain..."

Jeanne spoke with a blush and Shinomiya-sensei replied, "My thinking was too naive... For Shion's sake, I must teach her Shinomiya-style yakisoba as strictly as a teacher would." Then she handed the spatula to Shion.

"i WaNna beCoMe a ShiNoMiyA-stYle mAstEr. i wiLl dO mY bEst... Meow!"

Shion raised the spatula with great spirit and added her favorite "meow" as a verbal tic. Super cute.

Naturally, the effect on Shinomiya-sensei was overwhelming. The dignity she had just restored was instantly blown away.

"...I am at my limit."

Using her hand to cover her face while unsure what expression to make, she sighed.

Thus in this manner, after getting derailed many times, we continued to make yakisoba.

The steps for preparing yakisoba were quite simple. Anyone could do it with a recipe. However, there was much for us to learn from Shinomiya-sensei such as the coordination between ingredients and seasoning as well as techniques for controlling the heat applied.

"...The cutting of ingredients is of paramount importance, where flaws could result in vastly inferior taste. Mayhap the humans' delicate sense of taste ought to be commended."

Vritra was cooking with exceptional seriousness, turning into an excellent student for Shinomiya-sensei.

"Food pretty much tastes good once you heat it thoroughly with fire. Anyone can do it, so there's no need to waste time doing it yourself."

In contrast, Kili was not very enthusiastic. Jeanne issued a stern warning to Kili who was simply going through the motions.

"Hey Kili! Don't put in the meat first! You must start with the vegetables that take longer for the heat to permeate!"

Like me, Jeanne had had cooking practice during NIFL's survival training. As a result, her knife skills were fine.

However, seeing Jeanne give detailed instructions, I was reminded what happened when we were preparing a simple hot pot meal outdoors with the Sleipnir guys at the base after returning from a mission. On that occasion, Jeanne had been very insistent on the sequence to put in the ingredients to cook in the pot. She definitely had potential as a "hot pot master of proceedings."

Next, we continued to take turns in making yakisoba. After many rounds, everyone finally finished.

"Well done, everyone. This concludes my cooking lesson. The principal and Mica have prepared a barbecue, so please eat your fill."

A lively lunch began after Shinomiya-sensei praised our efforts.

"sO yuMmy...!"

Hearing Shion's cheering, my expression softened. It was only natural for Shinomiya-sensei to succumb to that innocent cuteness.

"...It really is delicious."

I gave my honest opinion after tasting a mouthful of yakisoba.

Hearing me, Lisa reached for the yakisoba.

"M-Mononobe Yuu—This sort of flavor is to your preference?"

"Hmm... I guess. I don't think it can get any better than this at a festival."

When I replied after giving it some thought, Lisa tilted her head in surprise.

"What an odd way of putting it. You sound like your standards would be different outside the context of a festival..."

"Well, how should I say this...? Going by my preferences, I guess my mother's yakisoba is the best after all."

When I admitted a little shyly, Lisa looked around her with a surprised expression.

"Excuse me... C-Come over here for a moment."

Seeming like she was conscious of the others, Lisa led me away and talked in a whisper.

"...Is there something different about the taste of the yakisoba your family makes?"

Since Lisa was in a swimsuit, the overwhelming presence of her massive bust leaning in was making my heart rate shoot up like a rocket. To avoid a misunderstanding about my preferences, I forcefully turned my gaze away.

"S-Slightly lighter on the seasoning. We also add onion and sausage..."

I recalled from memory the characteristics of the yakisoba made at my house. The yakisoba Shinomiya-sensei made did not include these ingredients. Upon recalling the memory, I really missed that particular taste.

"That is a lot of additional ingredients in the yakisoba. Umm... If you wish... Umm... A-Allow me to—"

"Oh, if you want the exact recipe, you could ask Mitsuki. She frequently helped my mother out so she should be able to replicate that yakisoba."

Compared to me, who had only eaten it, Mitsuki should have a clearer idea, having made it before.

That was what I thought when speaking. However, Lisa suddenly looked displeased.

"I see... Mitsuki-san is able to make it."

"What's wrong, Lisa?"

"...Nothing, I simply dislike myself for being greedy. This is clearly a domain belonging to Mitsuki-san..."

Frowning, Lisa sighed. It looked like she was not angry at me, but I did not understand what she meant.

"Domain...?"

"Yes—It is a domain belonging to Mitsuki-san as your younger sister and childhood friend. Although the room assignment dispute ended up resolved peacefully... A contest over what absolutely cannot be conceded would be unacceptable. Perhaps cohabitation might be harder than one would expect?"

Lisa smiled wryly.

"...I'll be careful. Back when deciding rooms, I relied on Firill to settle things peacefully—I keep depending on others. It was clearly a choice I had to make but I was indecisive."

Apologetic, I smiled wryly in return.

"Then choose. Your current ways are probably not going to work."

"Woah, you're strict..."

Lisa's merciless words made me slump my shoulders. However, she tapped me lightly on the head.

"Please do not misunderstand. I am not condemning you, because you have already made a choice. It is precisely the fact that you have made a choice that makes you unable to do anything to overturn that choice."

"...What do you mean?"

Unable to understand, I asked, prompting Lisa to sigh.

"You wish to take responsibility for all of us, don't you?"

"That's right—I want to protect everyone by my own hand... Rather than let someone else do it... I am the one who chose everyone on my own. That's why I will l definitely shoulder this responsibility."

I had said this to Ren before. I expressed my unshakable resolve to Lisa.

Hearing my words, Lisa looked anxious.

"You feel guilty about choosing us—It makes you feel like a weakling, doesn't it? However, I believe you have got it reversed."

"Reversed?"

"Indeed, because choosing a single person to protect is undoubtedly easier. In spite of that, you decided to protect all of us. This choice was certainly brought about because you are strong."

Lisa's smiling visage was too dazzling. I could not help but lower my eyes.

"I'm very happy that you're praising me—But you're giving me too much credit."

"Fufu, perhaps. In that case, please think of me as the only one who holds you in such high regard."

Lisa shrugged jokingly but her eyes were serious.

"Here on, even if you encounter another time when you must make a choice, know that everything is necessary for the sake of upholding your current resolve. At least, that is what I believe. So relax—No matter what happens, I will never forsake you."

Puffing out her magnificent chest to make a declaration, did Lisa suddenly feel embarrassed? Her face went red as though on fire.

"...What can I say? You're more than what the words 'a good woman' can describe."

I felt a huge load lifted off my heart all at once—Feeling an urge for tears to gush out of my eyes, I interjected with a laugh.

"Is that meant to be a compliment?"

Eating yakisoba, Lisa stared at me, slightly displeased.

"Of course, Lisa, you're someone beyond 'a good woman.'"

"Very well... But what would be beyond a good woman? C-Could it be, umm—"

Lisa looked at me with eyes of anticipation. I thought for a moment.

"Yes... Lisa, you're—"

"I-I am...?"

"—The best 'good woman.'"

Wondering how to convey myself accurately, I used that term. However, Lisa suddenly slumped her shoulders.

"Huh... You don't like that description?"

"No—well, if only you had a better choice of words... Never mind. The best... number one, in other words."

Lisa sighed and avoided eye contact shyly.

"Oh, it appears that Tia-san has been caught by Kili-san! I-I must rescue her."

Seeing Tia and Kili in some kind of argument, Lisa deliberately made an excuse to leave.

Apparently, Kili was serving yakisoba but Tia complained that there was too much carrot.

Arbitration did not seem necessary, but I suppose this would be one of those "domains" that Lisa must not concede.

I finished the yakisoba on my plate at once and walked over towards Charl and Mica-san at the barbecue.

Although yakisoba was tasty, this amount was not enough to be filling. Having swum for so long earlier, I definitely had the appetite for more food.

"Oh! My friend! You came! You came at the perfect moment!"

Seeing me approach, Charl handed me a wooden skewer with meat and vegetables on it.

"—Thank you. This looks very good."

Diced pieces of beef were overflowing with juices dripping onto green peppers, corn and tomatoes. Just the sight of it was mouth watering.

"My friend, let's eat over there? We need to talk."

"Mmm—Sure."

While taking a bite of green pepper and meat, I nodded.

"Let's go."

Charl took a barbecue skewer as well and started walking towards the breakwater. Nearby, Mica-san watched us silently, nodding lightly in acknowledgement when we made eye contact.

Seeing that, I realized Charl had something important to say.

"What do you need to tell me?"

"Yes... Plenty. First is a progress report."

Charl sat down on the steps of the breakwater and patted the spot next to her.

Next to the steps were flourishing coconut trees. The subtle geography of our location had formed a blind spot.

When I sat down by Charl, she started speaking seriously.

"For the sake of handling conflicts all over the world—or as preemptive precautions—I was asked by various nations to use my authority... But a few days ago, this request was officially withdrawn. Judging from the results... That fellow, Loki Jotunheim, has fulfilled his job as the hero protecting the world."

Charl shrugged while she spoke but her expression did not show despair. Rather, it was one full of relief.

"—That's really like Major Loki's way of doing things. He always achieves his goal in the end regardless of the process... Every single time."

I concurred with a wry smile. During the previous battle, he even tried to kill me and my companions, but I could not bring myself to hate him.

Although the fact that there were no casualties on Midgard's side played a major part, more importantly, Major Loki's resolve—his justice—was something I could not reject.

"Hoo, what a troublesome guy. Midgard clearly won yet the hardship we suffered remained essentially the same. Hip hip hurray, like the Ds at the academy, I can no longer leave this island arbitrarily."

"Why—?"

When I asked in shock, Charl sighed deeply.

"The United Nations and Asgard's higher-ups have finally noticed me as a result of this incident... Or rather, noticed that my authority isn't that convenient a tool. In other words, those who had been sucking up to me have started to become wary of me."

"Then... Will there be a problem?"

If Charl's position worsened, there was no predicting what problems could arise in the future. However, Charl smiled confidently in the face of my worrying.

"Relax, it's still very stable for the time being. The fact that NIFL's operation failed to kill me despite using the latest weapons and Code Lost—This had a great effect. As long as I lie low, the United Nations and Asgard probably won't provoke Midgard. They are people who know how to respect untouchable gods."

Charl finished in a laid back manner and took a bite from the barbecue skewer in her hand.

"Well, that's wonderful... I guess?"

I did not know if I should simply feel happy. Frowning, I bit some corn.

"Then... since I cannot leave the island, what I can do is limited. I can no longer stop war from breaking out somewhere in the world."

"Really, I see—But you don't need to make that kind of face, Charl."

Seeing her gloomy expression, I placed my hand on Charl's head and continued.

"Someone will surely stop war even if you don't, Charl. Take Major Loki for example. He must have carefully considered the future after assassinating you successfully. Just leave human matters to a human hero. Since you are now treated as an 'untouchable god' then just act like a god and watch without doing anything."

Charl smiled at what I said.

"LIke a god, huh. Indeed—That's the proper distance that should be maintained between the world and me."

Murmuring quietly, Charl ate the green pepper remaining on her skewer with slight distaste. Then she put down the finished skewere on the side and held my hand.

"However, if you were to stay in the same place as me, by my side, being touched by me could be very problematic, you know?"

"—Yeah, I know. I am your best friend, Charl."

I nodded matter-of-factly, but Charl looked very surprised for some reason.

"What did, you, just say...?"

"Huh? What about it?"

"Don't play dumb! I was listening properly! You just called me best friend, didn't you!?"

Charl asked excitedly. Her swimsuit was very bold and skimpy. Moving too close would make me lose my calm.

"In that case, anyway, I have somehow leveled up in your heart to become your best friend! Hu, hahaha—Awesome! Having experienced hardship together, a definite bond has finally sprouted between us!"

"Maybe—I guess."

Overwhelmed by Charl's emotions, I nodded.

"Back when Code Lost was devouring me, Charl, you were feeling the same pain too... We encouraged each other at the time, right? If there's a chance, I want us to encourage each other again."

"I see... So it was a special moment for you too. Oh—I clearly wanted to make you happy today, but haven't our positions have reversed now?"

Pressing her hands to her cheeks, Charl spoke softly in chagrin.

"Make me happy?"

What did she mean? I asked in surprise. Charl put on a pose and answered.

"Yes, the real main point of today... is to thank you. It was all thanks to you that we were able to get through that type of disaster."

"Not at all, I wasn't the only one trying hard."

I replied frantically and Charl nodded firmly.

"I know. That's why I organized the upcoming festival. I also used the best ingredients for the barbecue today. However, I think this still isn't enough for you."

Charl asserted strongly and started to fiddle with the button on her swimsuit.

"S_So... I was thinking of giving you a special present. But after hearing what the girls said just now, I've made my decision."

"What the girls said...?"

A bad feeling surfaced in my heart. Charl spoke with a blush.

"Yes, you... love girls' breasts, right?"

"C-Cough, c-c-cough!"

Before I could finish the last piece of corn, I coughed violently.

"No need to be shy. I understand that feeling very well. A young maiden's bosom is a supreme work of art, all filled with miracles. I wish I could frequently bury my face into those seductive valleys too."

"N-No, I don't—"

"Yes, I understand. You said you love small breasts too, the kind where you can't bury anything, right? After learning of that, I knew exactly what kind of present to give you."

Ignoring my objections, Charl continued. She placed her hand on her swimsuit's shoulder strap.

"Th-This still feels embarrassing after all... But it's for the sake of my best friend..."

The instant before she removed her loosened swimsuit, Charl covered her chest with her arms, staring at me while blushing to her ears.

"My friend—Feel free to play with my breasts as you wish. No matter what you do, I am fine with it."

Declaring that, Charl's pale skin turned red from embarrassment. Her fingertips trembled out of nervousness.

Charl normally did not act very feminine. Precisely because of that, her current racy look had a sort of irresistible charm to it.

"Umm, Charl, calm down first! Then listen to me."

However, I could not accept this gift of course. I mobilized the entirety of my sanity to stop her.

"I-I can't calm down! If I don't go with the momentum, I'll die of embarrassment! Ehhh, in that case—"

However, Charl did not stop. Mustering her spirit, she moved her arms away from her torso. Her shoulder strap slid down and thus the swimsuit she had been holding in place fluttered down lightly.

"Principal, watch out!"

At that instant, the sound of an acute explosion resounded all around.

At the same time, the ensuing wind and dust from the blast blocked my view completely.

"W-What happened!?"

Instantly ducking down, I felt tiny debris striking my back.

Then the wind from the explosion ceased. After the dust settled—I saw a mountain of debris before my eyes.

Pale and slender arms and legs were sticking out of the debris pile. They were twitching feebly.

"Phew... That was close."

Taking her gaze off poor Charl who had been buried alive, Iris wiped sweat from her forehead in relief while holding her staff-shaped fictional armament in her hand.

"No, Iris, I think you're the one who summoned danger—"

The explosion just now had been caused by Iris' transmutation. Realizing that, I replied.

"B-Because I came to find you, Mononobe, but saw the principal's swimsuit about to fall off in front of you... I knew I had to take action... It'd be very embarrassing to be seen naked... I had to help the principal as fast as possible!"

Dispelling her fictional armament, Iris waved her hands in apology while she spoke—She ran towards the principal who was buried under sand. It looked like Iris had mistakenly thought the swimsuit was sliding off due to an accident and was trying to save Charl from the predicament.

"...Even if that's true, you overdid it."

"Th-There was no time. But—I definitely overdid it. I'll rescue her and apologize. Go back to the others, Mononobe."

Iris spoke while digging hastily through the mountain of sand with her hands.

"If you're rescuing Charl, let me help you too."

As the "Gray" Vampire with the trait of eternal life and youth, Charl would not perish from this. However, suffocation would still be painful so it was best to rescue her as soon as possible.

However, Iris said frantically:

"G-Go dig that side! The principal's swimsuit definitely fell off, so don't you go digging at the chest!"

"Sure... Got it."

I nodded in response to Iris' forceful orders and focused on digging near Charl's head. Charl had wanted me to see, but I did not have the courage to bring this up.

Since the mountain of sand was smooth and light, I soon dug out Charl's face.

"Are you okay, Charl?"

"Ugh..."

I tried calling to her but she seemed to have fainted and made no response. However, since she was confirmed to be breathing, there was no need to worry about her anymore. Previously, I had experienced being buried under sand as part of a punishment game.

"Mononobe, leave the rest of the digging to me."

"Sure, then I'll be going now."

Although I felt bad for Charl who was just trying to thank me, I guess I'd better leave this to Iris first.

"Yes—Oh wait, Mononobe."

Iris nodded then called to me as though she had remembered something.

"What is it?"

"Umm... Mononobe wanted to see... The principal's chest, right? Sorry for interrupting you."

Iris apologized to me while I was looking back at her.

Like Charl, Iris also believed that I had an extraordinary thing for women's breasts.

"L-Listen, Iris—a lot of stuff happened, which resulted in this whole affair about me liking breasts, but it's not really true."

I explained seriously, but Iris smiled warmly at me.

"Mononobe... you're so kind. You're saying this to stop me from feeling guilty, right? But no need to push yourself—I take your matters to heart too."

Iris asserted strongly and approached me swiftly.

"Since you didn't get to see the principal's chest, you can bury yourself into mine."

Saying that, Iris' eyes shone with determination. She placed her hands on my head.

"Iris, what are you planning to do—"

Getting this close to Iris in her swimsuit made my heart pound uncontrollably.

Iris silently smiled at me in my confusion then pulled my head towards her chest.

"—Mmph!?"

Starting with my nose, my face was buried into a warm, soft and pale valley.

Iris' skin was very warm—The sweet fragrance from her body was causing my mental circuits to freeze instantly.

"Mononobe... How is it?"

Iris whispered to me in a warm voice. However, I could not answer her.

My mind was completely swallowed up by softness.

My heart melted—drowning in a sea of pure white.

By the time I came back to my senses, Iris was standing in front of me, fidgeting.

My sense of time had gone hazy like in a dream. As a result, I could not help but doubt whether this was reality.

"Oh, umm—Just as you can see, there's nothing to be shy about... Mononobe, you like... my breasts a bit, don't you?"

However, when Iris asked me this with a blush, I realized that the sensation had not been a dream.

"Y-Yeah."

I nodded stiffly and Iris patted her chest in relief.

"Thank goodness... U-Umm—If you're satisfied with that, I hope you'll quit staring at other people's chests today."

Covering up the pale cleavage under her swimsuit, Iris smiled.

"I-I got it."

Aware that my voice had gone up in pitch due to excitement, I answered. Next, I turned around and started walking like a robot. My mind was still halfway in a dream, but when I left the stairs at the breakwater and passed through the dense patch of trees that blocked the view to everyone else—This dreamy feeling vanished completely.

"....."

Dressed in black swimsuit, Mitsuki was standing there silently, expressionless.

"Mitsuki—"

Holding my breath, I stood rooted to the spot.

On further thought, since Iris had caused such a large explosion, it would not be strange for anyone to come looking.

Judging from Mitsuki's expression... Most likely, she had witnessed the scene just now.

"Nii-san."

Mitsuki called to me quietly.

"Y-Yes."

I reflexively stood straight and answered Mitsuki.

"Umm—I-I have no idea what I should do."

"Huh? You s-saw it... right? ...You're not... mad?"

I was expecting Mitsuki to scold me but she was acting strange, confusing me.

"I saw it. Naturally, I am very mad."

However, Mitsuki instantly replied in a stiff voice.

"I-I see."

"Yes, nevertheless—I have no idea with what attitude I should be angry. From the student council president's standpoint, I should scold you for shameless behavior outdoors and have you write repentance essays... But on a personal level, I am very jealous of Iris-san."

Mitsuki showed an expression of guilt.

"Jealous?"

"Yes—Because your mind is fully occupied by Iris-san, isn't it? If possible, I..."

Supporting her small but well-shaped bosom with her arms, Mitsuki blushed.

I was surprised to see Mitsuki like that, but she instantly switched back to a solemn expression.

"However, I... can I truly compete against Iris-san on a level playing field? Nii-san, you have gained many people whom you must protect... And there are many people supporting you. I have no idea where I should stand anymore."

Saying that, Mitsuki pressed her hand against her dragon mark on the back of her neck. It was almost like she was confirming the proof that she had selected by me—

"So, umm... Although I said I would like you to think carefully about your relationship with everyone, before that—I hope you could decide my position as quickly as possible. Please?"

"Your position...?"

Seeing Mitsuki's suffering expression, I felt my chest tighten violently.

"What exactly I am to you, Nii-san... And who is the one dearest to you."

"Well—"

Just as I was about to answer, Mitsuki shook her head at me.

"Do not worry, Nii-san. Even if you choose someone, you will never speak of abandoning the others. I am well aware that you will never give up taking responsibility for us, Nii-san. Consequently—I only wish for you to make a decision then tell me."

Although her tone was very gentle, there was a sense of urgency in her voice.

"If you do that, I will be able to work hard in that position's capacity. Surely, a situation like now when I am hesitating over what I should do… would exist no longer. So please, Nii-san."

Mitsuki spoke in earnest and bowed her head deeply towards me.

"Yeah… I got it. I'll hurry… No, I will decide before this coming festival—So please raise your head."

I must have committed a grave mistake to have Mitsuki troubled to such an extent.

Feeling intensely guilty and apologetic, I nodded deeply.

"Thank you, Nii-san."

Looking up, Mitsuki thanked with a slightly relieved expression.

Thus, we returned slightly to normal at last. With a gentle and beautiful smile, Mitsuki urged me, "Let us return to the others."

While we were walking back to the group, I kept pondering the answer to Mitsuki's question.

A decision rather than a choice—This was "something that must be done now" which I had never expected.

Surely, the answer was already in my heart.

However, expressing this answer properly was an extremely difficult task.

Part 5

"What am I being so impatient for…?"

Eating barbecue under a parasol, Mononobe Mitsuki sighed deeply.

—I clearly had not intended to say that sort of thing…

Recalling what she had just said to him—Mononobe Yuu—deep regret surged in her heart.

Of course, it felt like a load had been lifted after speaking these words she had held back for so long. However, it would have been better to wait longer. There was clearly no reason to rush.

"I am such a bad girl…"

In hindsight, she was the only one who felt better.

Although she had told him to decide rather than to choose—She had not said this out of worry for him.

This was a defensive line she had set up in advance, fearing she was not the chosen one.

—Because, if I force Nii-san to choose one person… He will definitely pick Iris-san. Iris-san certainly does not think so, but—that is what I believe.

Despite this was too cowardly, too unfair, she found it impossible to dispel this thought no matter what. Furthermore, she was tired of agonizing over these matters.

Hence, I had to verify whether or not I am number one and also to get closer to him… That was why I made such a demand.

"Haa…"

Too much thinking? I was having a splitting headache. Perhaps staying under the sun was making me dizzy from the heat.

I put down my tray that was carrying yakisoba onto the mat and brought my hand to the back of my neck.

The back of my neck was the location of my dragon mark—The spot where Nii-san had kissed.

Whenever I felt a bit unwell, I would touch my dragon mark like this—I felt reassured by recalling my vow with.

It was the same today, after pressing on my dragon mark for a while, my mind cleared up as though a gray haze had dispersed.

At that moment, I noticed my parasol's shadow was overlapping with different, petite shadow.

I looked up to see Vritra standing there in her school swimsuit.

"…Vritra?"

Sensing unease in those eyes looking at her, Mitsuki called out hesitantly.

"Art thou feeling unwell?"

Vritra then asked solemnly.

"Oh no, I am fine now."

"Is that so? However, thou shouldst not strain thyself."

"Yes… Thank you."

While feeling surprised by this show of care, Mitsuki thanked Vritra.

"……"

Vritra stared silently at Mitsuki, looking as though she still had other business.

Feeling as sense of deja vu regarding this gaze, Mitsuki frowned slightly.

—Speaking of which, I seem to recall speaking with Vritra about something previously…

When Mitsuki tried to remember, the pain from the back of her neck interrupted her thoughts.

Watching Mitsuki, Vritra frowned then turned around silently.

"Thou dost not look well after all. I shall fetch a drink for thee."

"Eh, sure—Thank you for your concern."

Curious about Vritra's strange kindness, Mitsuki saw her off.

—Oh, I, just now…

She seemed to remember something just earlier, but now she could not recall what it was.

It was possible that her health still had not recovered after all. Although Vritra had already noticed it, she must not let *him* find out.

Looking at him preparing food together with the others, Mitsuki pressed her hand tightly against her chest that was pounding inside.

Chapter 04 – Full Moon of Heavenly Rites

Part 1

On the day of the festival, many students were traveling along the coastal road during daytime, usually deserted except during commutes, which was lined with vendor stalls. They were also dressed differently from usual.

"What a great move on the principal's part, providing yukatas to all students. Everyone looks very different."

Having finished chopping some cabbage at Shinomiya-sensei's stall, Lisa looked out towards the female students in yukatas, coming to buy yakisoba.

"Yes—It doesn't feel like we're at Midgard anymore. It's really like a festival in Japan."

Likewise in charge of the stall with Lisa, I agreed while cutting carrots.

To adhere completely to a festival in Japanese style, Charl had issued a yukata to every student. Furthermore, the students could choose whatever style they preferred.

It was probably borne by Charl's personal tastes, but definitely a lot of work.

But thanks to that, the girls were all very excited. The main event of the festival was the fireworks show at night, but the seaside was already very busy.

"A Japanese festival... I have long wanted to attend one in person."

"I'll take you to one if a chance comes up. However—It'll be pretty tough."

When I smiled wryly, Lisa frowned.

"What do you mean by that? Are you saying I will get lost?"

"No, that's not it. You're too pretty and striking in your yukata, Lisa, so guarding you will be tough."

"Wha—"

Turning bright red, Lisa halted in her food preparation.

"P-Pretty... If only you had said this earlier—back when I first showed myself to you in the yukata. Saying it at a time like this would throw me off-balance."

Confronted with Lisa's sharp glare, I apologized frantically.

"S-Sorry about that, but I already praised your yukata look long ago..."

Like the girls, I was also wearing a yukata.

Currently at the stall, Lisa and I were the ones in charge of preparation while four others including Shinomiya-sensei and Shion were cooking and serving customers. Since the shop area was limited, we were on a shift system. The rest of the class was walking around to check out other vendors.

I was wearing a traditional navy-blue yukata for men, but girls all loved to dress up glamorously.

Lisa was wearing a wisteria yukata with floral patterns, a great match for her glittering blonde hair which had been coiled up.

"tHaNk yOu."

Bowing to customers, Shion was wearing a cute yukata with patterns of blooming pink flowers on a white background. To make up for her slight lack in height, she was standing on a stool.

The adorable Shion was stimulating the girls' maternal instincts. I heard "So cute!" many times.

Although Shinomiya-sensei was frequently distracted by Shion's cuteness, she continued to cook masterfully.

She was dressed in a yukata that was primarily blue with white flowers, exemplifying a mature and conservative style. Beneath her swaying ponytail, her neck flashed in and out of sight, making my heart pound with excitement.

Naturally, I could not voice all of these thoughts but I still expressed my honest opinion to the girls earlier.

However, Lisa did not look satisfied.

"You lumped us all together and said it looked good on us. You call that a compliment?"

"Uh... But it's too unnatural if I praised you one by one—And you girls were about to depart too. If I showed too much interest, it'd turn into sexual harassment, right?"

When I apologized, Lisa shrugged with resignation.

"Although it was an insensitive thing to say, it would still be better than no comment at all. I am glad for the fact that you take an interest in my attire. Well, getting mad or not is a separate matter."

"Why does it feel like I'm being subjected to unreasonable demands... Fine. Starting now, I'll focus on getting you not mad."

While sighing, I nodded with a wry smile.

Seeing my reaction, Lisa's eyebrow twitched slightly.

"—It appears that you have regained a little normalcy."

"Huh?"

Surprised, I looked back at Lisa. She was wearing a complicated expression.

"Recently, something has been troubling you, yes? Although I dared not ask about it earlier, has it been resolved?"

Continuing to cut cabbage, Lisa asked me.

Ever since the barbecue, I had been thinking about how to answer Mitsuki's question. However, it looked like Lisa had seen through me.

This was definitely not surprising. That was how Lisa was as a person.

"Resolved... Not yet. But I know how to handle it properly, so you don't need to worry."

I answered vaguely.

I had not been able to reach an answer before the festival. All I had done was nonstop reminiscence.

Digging deeper into the depths of the memories Tia had recovered for me—I carefully went through my memories, starting from my earliest recollections with Mitsuki and dug out every memory since then.

For memories that had faded, I would call my parents to confirm, asking them to try their best to recall and send me photos preserved in albums for me as reference material.

In this manner, I kept thinking about Mitsuki, all the way till today.

But even though I still had not found a clear answer—I should be able to speak naturally when I meet Mitsuki later.

"Is that so? Then I shan't worry. Please do your best."

Lisa smiled and spoke with reassurance. She began to cut cabbage swiftly again.

"Yes, I'll give it my best."

I smiled too and nodded, cutting carrots in sync with her rhythm—

I had agreed with the girls to go check out the festival together when our shift ended.

My promised meeting with Mitsuki was last—before the fireworks. I was going to convey my answer then.

Before that, I wanted to enjoy the festival with everyone and so intended to calm my emotions—However...

"So, the winning team gets to monopolize Yuu."

"Yeah—Agreed. The team that wins the most prizes wins."

In front of the ring tossing game stall, Kili and Ariella were staring at each other.

Both of them looked good in their yukatas, but now was not the time to be praising them.

"Do not fail mine expectations, daughter."

"Good luck, Onee-chan."

The two sides had Vritra and Ren cheering for them respectively.

"Uh... Wouldn't it be better for us to stick together?"

Having walked around with these four so far, I tried to mediate.

In the beginning, the four girls were having fun together relatively peacefully, but Kili and Ariella later got into a conflict—Then it became like this.

Ariella had interfered in Kili's night visit before, which resulted in a subtle sense of competitiveness to develop between them.

"No, Yuu. We're already at the stall, so I won't give up."

"That's right, Mononobe-kun. For our sake so that the three of us can enjoy the festival together in peace, this contest is unavoidable."

In perfect agreement in a certain way, the two of them immediately rejected my suggestion.

Next, they presented cash coupons to the stall keeper.

Along with the yukatas, we had been issued cash coupons that could be used at the vendors during the festival. Normally when buying things from the cafeteria or the snack shop, we could pay by direct debit from our personal accounts through our portable terminals, but this was not available at these stalls.

Furthermore, since Midgard's Ds earned money by transmuting resources from dark matter, many of them were immensely wealthy. Unless there was some restriction imposed on sales, the merchandise could get sold out in a flash.

Since this festival was held to let the entire student body enjoy themselves, one method to prevent things from getting sold out was to institute cash coupons.

"Okay, three rings each."

Saying that, a female member of Midgard staff handed out rings to Kili and Ariella. I had seen her many times before in the command center. Although I did not know her name, I remembered she was the operator.

It looked like all of Midgard's staff really were running this festival.

"Since the type of prize doesn't matter, aiming for small prizes is fine too."

Kili confirmed the size of the rings and said quietly with a serious expression.

The prizes were each secured onto the stand and could be won by landing a ring to encircle the desired prize. Comparatively speaking, it was more likely for the rings to bounce off larger prizes.

"Although I've been to a Japanese festival with Ren before—Compared to the original stalls, these prizes are really grand."

Ariella appraised the prizes while remarking poignantly.

"Mm... So many cute ones too. That bunny... is great."

Standing straight, Ren was looking at a rabbit plushie while her eyes shone.

As pointed out by Ren, most of the prizes were cute and girly things. That selection of prizes was only natural since everyone was a girl except for me.

"Oh, do you want that, Ren? I'd really like to win it, but it's kind of big. It'd be too risky if I'm trying to win the showdown."

Seeing Ariella hesitating, I raised my hand.

"Then I'll go for the plushie."

Saying that, I handed a cash coupon to the staff and received the rings.

"—Thank you, Onii-chan."

Ren's happy gratitude was filling me up with motivation.

"Yes, leave it to me."

To be honest, I was very confident.

For someone like me with honed combat abilities, tossing an object was merely a single faceted skill. Given three chances, I could also make slight adjustments. There was no reason for me to miss.

But while I was checking the ring's weight and shape, Vritra, who was standing on Ren's other side, tugged at my yukata sleeve.

She pointed at a certain product seriously.

"I desire that."

It was a bag containing candies of different colors. It was a relatively challenging target because the ring was barely large enough to fit around it.

"Why don't you try it yourself first?"

"I have decided to use all coupons on food. I do not have any to spare on such games with uncertain prizes."

Despite Vritra's matter-of-fact declaration that only served her own interests, I still went "fine" and sighed. None of the prizes was anything I wanted. Since I had three rings, I might as well help Vritra.

"—Got it. I'll help Ren first."

"Yes. I am counting on thee, my comrade."

Since we were cooperating, Vritra haughtily tapped my arm without worry.

Next, Ariella, Kili and I stood side by side with me in the middle and started to toss rings.

"Yes!"

Ariella and Kili won small prizes of low risk.

On further thought, they were very definitely very competitive. Succeeding on the first toss was only natural.

Having no intention of losing to them, I focused my concentration and stared at the rabbit plushie intently.

I adjusted my breathing and tossed the ring like releasing a hand grenade.

Slightly off, the ring's center of gravity was unstable, wobbling while it flew, but this was within my calculations.

Having calculated the loss of distance due to the wobbling, my first toss landed over the rabbit plushie as intended.

"Wow!"

Ren cheered out loud in a rare display.

"You are all amazing."

Accepting the prize from the female staff, I handed the rabbit to Ren.

"Here you go, Ren."

"Mm... So happy. I'll... cherish this gift from Onii-chan."

Blushing, Ren hugged the rabbit plushie.

However, Vritra soon urged "next one is mine."

Smiling wryly, I attempted the second toss.

Building on my success against a high-risk target on the first toss, I did not need to be that nervous. Tossed lightly, the ring landed on the bag of candy.

"Hmm, well done."

Vritra praised my efforts haughtily as usual but seeing her relieved expression, I felt that I had nothing to be mad about.

Next to me, Kili and Ariella also succeeded on their second toss.

"You're not bad."

"—You too are better than I thought."

Seing sparks fly between them, I picked up my last ring.

Since I had won Ren and Vritra's prizes, I no longer had any clear target. As a result, winning anything was fine...

However...

After scanning the stand, I noticed a Japanese style brooch in a corner of the merchandise. It was an exquisitely crafted brooch with a red maple design.

—A brooch huh.

It would not suit me but I remembered Tia's happy face from when I had given her a brooch in the past. I tossed the ring over.

Following a trajectory even more ideal than my second toss, the ring landed accurately over the brooch.

Thus, my rings were all used up. Only Kili and Ariella's third toss was left.

After concentrating for a long while, the two girls exhaled strongly and tossed their rings at the same time.

"—Oh."

Seeing the two rings' trajectories, I could not help but cry out.

They were apparently aiming for the same target. The rings collided in midair and fell on the ground.

"Why did you get in my way!?"

Kili roared angrily and Ariella replied with raised eyebrows.

"No, you're the one who got in my way, Kili."

After glaring at each other for a while, they handed coupons to the female staff at the same time.

"Another go."

"Another go, okay?"

The second round of the contest began.

"...Looks like it'll take a while."

"I am tired."

Satisfied with their prizes, Ren and Vritra commented wearily.

Indeed, it would be very hard to reach a conclusion between Kili and Ariella. When serious, neither of them was going to make a mistake while attempting interference would only end in mutual failure.

When I saw the fifth round starting, I suggested to Ren and Vritra:

"While they're still competing, why don't we first check out the nearby stalls?"

"Mm, good idea."

"Hmm, that frankfurter stand first, yes?"

The two of them responded immediately.

Then we walked to the vendors opposite to us.

In the end, Kili and Ariella did not manage to settle who was the winner. Since the time for their shift arrived, they had no choice but to give up.

Carrying the mountain of prizes they had won, I was really glad that their shift had started before they could use up all their coupons.

Part 2

"Th-This is... goldfish scooping...!"

Next to the water tank with little fish swimming about, holding a goldfish scooping tool in her hand—the paper net—she was shaking in excitement.

"Well, more precisely, it's tropical fish scooping."

Standing behind her, I calmly corrected Iris.

The small fish swimming in the tank were not goldfish but tropical fish such as guppies.

Bringing live animals into Midgard from outside was very difficult, so these were probably acquired locally.

"That's fine too! I've always wanted to try it."

With heightened spirits, Iris held her paper net.

Iris had suggested for our class to set up a goldfish scooping stall for the school festival last time. Although her idea had not been used at the time, it looked like it had taken root deeply in her heart.

Walking around together this whole time, Tia, Firill and Jeanne also expressed their interest.

"Looks very fun! Tia will do it too!"

"...How amusing. I will have a go, as a sort of life experience."

"It's not a chance that comes up every day, I'll give it a try. But... What do we do after scooping them up? Eat them?"

Hearing Jeanne's question, Iris looked back and smiled.

"Jeez, Jeanne-chan, you've gotten it all wrong. You take these fish back home to keep as pets. I can't believe you're such a glutton, Jeanne-chan."

"Well, Iris, you made the same mistake before too."

Iris explained proudly, but her face suddenly turned red when I reminded her.

"J-Jeez, Mononobe! Don't reveal that—"

Listening to our conversation, the female staff pointed to the back of the stall.

"For the convenience of customers who succeeded in catching fish, we have prepared fish tanks that can be purchased using coupons. In addition, you may also choose to exchange your fish for other prizes based on quantity."

As expected of a festival operated by Charl, the after-sales was very well-prepared. Those who found keeping fish a hassle would be pleased too.

"Hmm, should I exchange for prizes..."

Seeing Iris hesitating, I sighed.

"Iris, why don't you worry about it after you've caught the fish? It'll probably turn out to be harder than you think, you know?"

"G-Got it. I'll give it a try!"

Iris answered happily and aimed for the tropical fish.

Tia, Firill and Jeanne also arrived at the fish tank, holding paper nets.

"Tia will haul in a large catch!"

All fired up, Tia targeted a swimming guppy with full force.

Although it was a good choice of target, her paper net broke before it touched the guppy when she smashed it into the water.

"Eh—Why did this happen?"

Looking at the broken paper net, Tia cocked her head unhappily.

Seeing Tia's failure, Firill murmured seriously.

"It's just like in books... The paper net breaks easily. Those scenes where the male protagonist tried to show his cool side to a girl—I remember it's important to avoid the water's resistance as much as possible..."

Making use of her knowledge gleamed from stories, Firill slid her paper net sideways into the water and scooped up a guppy.

"Wow, I did it. Perhaps... I might have talent in this area."

Firill cheered. Watching her, Iris and Jeanne started to imitate.

"Yes! I got one too!"

"—It's not that hard once you get the trick."

The two of them caught guppies splendidly and made their second attempt in the same manner.

"If only Tia can be as good as Firill..."

Already out of the game, Tia slumped her shoulders in disappointment.

However, Firill, Iris and Jeanne all had tiny holes appearing in their paper nets when scooping their third fish.

"Oh... It broke."

"Well, it's made of paper after all."

Iris and Firill failed respectively on their fourth and fifth fish.

Jeanne kept going, using the edge of her paper net to catch her ninth fish, but finally lost at the milestone of the tenth fish.

"Captain, this is a pleasure of hunting that can only be realized in a nonflowing fish tank."

Displaying her accomplishment to me, Jeanne said contentedly.

Despite having been told that the fish were not meant to be eaten, Jeanne seemed to have caught her fish with a hunting mindset.

"Would you like to take your fish home? Or exchange them for prizes?"

When the female staff asked us, the girls thought for a while before giving their respective answers.

"Hmm... It's a rare chance, let's buy a fish tank together."

When Iris said that, Firill clapped her hands together.

"Then let's buy a bigger fish tank to keep them together. Putting it in Mitsuki's dorm might be a bit tacky... But it might be nice as decoration for the dining hall. What do you think, Jeanne?"

"Yes, Zwei would like it too."

Jeanne agreed with delight. Imagining Shion's smile, her expression turned gentle.

After buying a fish tank using coupons, the three girls decided to make a trip back to the dorm.

"Mononobe, Tia-chan, we'll be right back. Just wait for a moment!"

Pushing a cart loaded with the fish tank, the three girls left in the dorm's direction.

"Hmm..."

Left out because she had failed to catch any fish, Tia was pouting with a bit of a sulk.

"How about we go check out other stalls first?"

Patting Tia's head with her little red horns, I suggested. Tia nodded lightly.

Normally, she would instantly show joy when I patted her head, but she was currently quite demoralized.

At that moment, I remembered the Japanese brooch I had won at the ring toss stall, so I took it out of my front pocket.

"Here, Tia, I have a present for you..."

"A present?"

While she was tilting her head in puzzlement, I brought my closed hand in front of Tia's face and opened it.

"I saw this at the ring toss stall. I thought it'd look good on you so I won it."

"Wow! It's so pretty!"

Seeing the red maple brooch, Tia smiled with happy radiance. I was relieved to see her reaction.

"How about putting it on if you like it?"

"Of course! So happy!"

Finally smiling, Tia reached out with her hand but stopped halfway.

"...What's wrong?"

I made a questioning gaze and Tia looked up at me awkwardly.

"Umm, can Yuu put it on for Tia?"

"Sure, no problem—"

Nodding, I bent down. At that moment, I realized why Tia was feeling shy.

She was wearing a yukata with thin fabric. The size was just right and the weather was relatively hot, so the yukata was clinging tightly to her body. If I had to pin the brooch on to the chest of the yukata for her, my fingertips would unavoidably touch her.

"Umm... Where do you want to wear it?"

"How about here?"

Just in case, I confirmed, but sure enough, Tia pointed to her right chest.

Frozen in my posture, kneeling in front of Tia, I noticed the surrounding gazes all gathering upon me.

From the perspective of others, me bending over reaching out for Tia's chest must look rather bizarre. As a guy, I was already very conspicuous and this might cause unexpected misunderstandings.

"L-Let's do this somewhere else."

I stood up and holding Tia's hand, I started to look for a place less conspicuous.

"Yuu is holding tia's hand... Yuu so aggressive today, Tia so happy!"

Holding my hand, Tia smiled and spoke in a bouncy voice.

There were female students all over the place along the coastal road, so I took Tia through the stalls to enter the dense jungle.

With leaves blocking the sun, it was relatively dim and quiet. No one would discover us if it was here.

"Okay, I'm going to put it on."

I let go of Tia's hand and stooped down in front of her.

"Y-Yes... Please go ahead."

Blushing, Tia nodded, staring intently at my hand that was holding the brooch.

I nervously reached for the right of Tia's chest, feeling like I was committing a crime.

Hesitation was not going to change this weird atmosphere, so I mustered my determination and touched Tia's yukata.

"Mm—"

While the soft sensation of the mild bulge from her chest was transmitting to me through the thin fabric—Tia moaned lightly.

In order to secure the brooch's pin, it was necessary to lift the yukata's fabric, but I had trouble pinching the thin fabric up.

"Y-Yuu... It tickles..."

When my fingertip rubbed against her chest, Tia trembled and moaned passionately. Her reaction was making my heart beat faster and faster.

At this rate, it was almost like I was teasing Tia. Although I was hesitating whether to use more strength since I was touching her chest, letting this drag on would be a bad idea.

"Sorry, I'll get it done straight away."

Ignoring the fact that I was touching her chest, I pinched the fabric hard with my fingertips and lifted the yukata forcefully.

"Ah—Hyah!"

Tia cried out sharply and her delicate body jumped.

It looked like I had touched her somewhere sensitive, but at least I managed to pinch the fabric so I immediately secured the brooch.

"D-Done."

Having finished Tia's request, I wiped sweat from my brow.

"Yuu... Thank you."

Blushing, Tia touched the brooch and thanked me.

"You're welcome."

"Yuu's present... Tia will treasure it. Tia has been treasuring the flower brooch from last time too."

While she was holding the maple brooch tightly, Tia's eyes turned watery.

"Really...? I'm happy to hear that."

I felt happy but also a little embarrassed.

"Umm, Yuu—Does it look good on Tia?"

Tia let go of the brooch and asked for my opinion.

"Yes, very good."

Just as I had expected, the red maple brooch was a good match for Tia's hair and the floral patterns on her yukata.

"Really? Come closer for a look. Is it straight?"

"I really think it's fine—"

Tia gestured for me to come closer so I bent down to inspect the brooch on her chest.

But in that instant, Tia took a step forward and leaned against my face.

While the soft and slightly moist sensation surprised me, Tia stepped back slightly and smiled shyly.

"Unless Tia did this... Tia could not express thanks completely."

Saying that, Tia hugged my arm tightly.

"But Tia is not done expressing, so this will continue! Let's go, Yuu!"

Pulling me by the arm in this manner, Tia walked towards the road packed with stalls.

"It's hard to walk if you cling so tightly."

"Don't worry. If it's hard to walk, we can walk slowly."

Flustered, I pointed out it was hard to walk like this, but Tia had no intention of changing posture.

"—Got it. I'll go along with this."

Since it was Tia's wish. I nodded with a wry smile.

Back to the festival, walking together this intimately, we instantly gathered stares. However, it was pointless to be bothered by them, so we walked around the stalls together like this.

It looked like Tia had completely forgotten about failing to catch a single fish. She was very excited right now.

"Yuu, are you happy?"

Holding a water balloon from a vendor, Tia asked.

"Yeah, I'm happy."

After I replied instantly, Tia looked at the sky where the sun was sinking gradually.

"Tia is happy too, but—Tia worries whether being this happy is allowed."

"...Why?"

Tia mumbled when I asked.

Seeing the slight anxiety on her face, I instantly knew what she was thinking about.

"Don't tell me you're worried about the ninth calamity? Vritra said there was no urgency yet, you know?"

"Yes—She said the same to Tia, so Tia did not think about scary possibilities at all. But... is that really okay?"

Seeing the unease surface in Tia's eyes, I nodded firmly.

"Yes, at least for today, you won't need to be punished for enjoying yourself."

I asserted strongly and reached out to pat Tia's head.

Naively pushing things on the back burner would definitely be bad, but there should not be any problem with waiting until the festival ended.

"...Thank goodness. Tia thinks so too."

Tia smiled with relief.

It was probably due to her extreme joy at the moment that made her so concerned about summoning the seeds of calamity.

Even if told there was no urgency, it was true that a crisis was approaching. Perhaps there would be no choice but to confront it soon.

At Vritra's request, I had not spoken to the others about this... However, I decided that the minimum necessary information should be shared with them, after all.

While deciding in my thoughts to have a good discussion with Vritra about this after the festival, I continued to visit the stalls along the road with Tia.

Part 3

The red sun was gradually sinking into the horizon afar—The first star of the evening was appearing in the eastern sky.

However, the most striking celestial object in the night sky was not a star of Class I luminosity. Instead, it was a celestial body only visible from the ground, the Earth's satellite, no smaller than the sun in appearance—the Moon.

It seemed to be a full moon tonight. The white sphere had become the ruler of the vast night sky, taking over the sun's presence.

Most likely, under the illumination of tonight's moonlight, faint stars would not be visible from the ground.

—A bright well-lit night was coming.

I sat down on the breakwater in front of the dorm, picturing the approaching night.

This was towards edge of the vendor area and there were fewer people walking around.

"Nii-san."

I heard a voice calling to me from behind.

I looked back to see Mitsuki looking up at me solemnly, dressed in a yukata with her hair done up.

"—Oh, you're late."

I got off the breakwater and checked the time on my portable terminal. It was ten-odd minutes later than our appointed time. This was quite rare for the meticulous Mitsuki.

"My apologies, some of the student council girls visited the stall near the end of the shift... I was unable to leave immediately..."

"Don't worry about it. I've always been the one who's late when meeting up with you in the past, Mitsuki."

Mitsuki smiled wryly at me when I brought up the past.

"Yes—One time in elementary school, I stood at the school gates waiting for you, Nii-san, because I wanted to walk home with you. However, you failed to show up... When I went into school to look for you, to my surprise, you were playing soccer with classmates or some such."

I looked away from Mitsuki who was speaking with slight resentment.

"Well... Refusing an invitation so that I could go home with my little sister... That'd be a bit embarrassing."

"Ah—Indeed there definitely something like that. Do you remember, Nii-san, when you scolded me 'shut up, idiot' and we had a great fight. It clearly would have been fine had you explained the reason properly."

With Mitsuki staring at me in a slightly appalled gaze, I defended my past self's behavior.

"But if I said that, wouldn't it sound like I disliked walking home with you, Mitsuki? Also, the matter itself felt embarrassing to me... I had no choice."

"...Thank you for being considerate for me at the time, Nii-san, but I seriously felt really hurt when you called me an idiot."

Mitsuki looked at me with a sulking expression.

"Well, what can I say... I'm sorry. I was just a stupid kid back then."

When I scratched my head and apologized, Mitsuki smiled mischievously at me.

"Then you are very mature now, Nii-san?"

"...Not at all. I know I was wrong, no need to be mean."

Although I had grown since then, I was still a stupid kid and had no idea how to make myself more mature.

"Fufu—I indulged in a little payback because I was reminded of my days waiting for you. After all, Nii-san, I waited for you at Midgard for three long years."

Mitsuki shrugged lightly then naturally held my hand.

Like holding my hand on the road home from elementary school while I felt embarrassed the whole way, Mitsuki smiled happily at me and said, "Let us get going."

I could not help but feel my chest tighten at the discovery that simply having memories changed my perception of the world.

I realized that during the time when my memories had been sealed by Yggdrasil, all I had seen was Mitsuki's surface.

But now, I was able to discern Mitsuki's thoughts and feelings from subtle changes in expression.

"Do you want to have a chocolate banana?"

Noticing Mitsuki's eyes of anticipation looking at a chocolate banana stall, I asked her.

"—Yes. Actually, I saw this vendor on my way here and have been curious the whole time."

Nodding honestly, Mitsuki pulled my hand and walked towards the stall.

"We ate eat these at a festival in the neighboring town before."

Mitsuki nodded nostalgically when I reminisced.

"Yes... This would be my first time eating one again after that."

"Me too. Which flavor do you want?"

Looking up at the menu, I asked Mitsuki.

"Then like last time, I shall have the strawberry chocolate."

"As for me—I'll take the original."

We handed coupons to the female staff at the stall and took a chocolate banana each.

Mitsuki's was the pink strawberry-flavored one while mine was coated with ordinary brown chocolate.

"Nii-san, shall we head to the seaside? I would like to talk about certain things in a quieter environment."

"Sure thing."

I nodded with some nervousness. I did not need to be told what she wanted to talk about.

I was to give a reply to the question that Mitsuki had asked previously.

But after walking up the breakwater stairs, we noticed there were many girls on the beach.

"Let us take a stroll for a bit."

"Sure."

We started walking away from the crowds. Illuminated by the setting sun's rays, our shadows were stretch out long.

"...Although a bit different from that time's, it is still delicious."

Chewing small mouthfuls of her chocolate banana, Mitsuki quietly commented.

"Really—"

Due to trying to organize in my mind what I was going to say later, I responded quite sluggishly. However, Mitsuki did not mind and continued.

"We went out many times in the past, Nii-san... But that day of the festival was special to me. Nii-san, I invited you out while thinking of it a date, you know?"

"R-Really?"

"Yes, although it was life as usual for you, Nii-san, I thought of it as my first date. As a result, I still remember many details from it."

Saying that, Mitsuki halted.

There were no signs of other people around us. Most of the sun had dipped below the horizon. The sound of waves could be heard clearly in the background.

"Like in the past, may I... try a bite of yours, Nii-san?"

Mitsuki motioned towards my chocolate banana, looking up as she spoke.

"Oh, sure."

Flustered by Mitsuki's seemingly flirtatious expression, I presented my chocolate banana to her. However, I noticed that my teeth marks had been left behind on the top end of the chocolate banana I was eating.

"Oh—I bit it just now..."

"I do not mind."

Before I could withdraw the chocolate banana, Mitsuki sank her teeth into one end of the banana.

"Mm... Gulp..... Thank you. Then please have some of mine too, Nii-san."

Swallowing her mouthful of banana in one go, Mitsuki presented her chocolate banana to me.

"O-Okay."

When I took a bite from the chocolate banana where Mitsuki's teeth marks were imprinted, a strawberry flavor and the sweetness of chocolate expanded in my mouth.

However, a sweet atmosphere surpassing this in sweetness was spreading between me and Mitsuki while we silently continued to eat our respective chocolate bananas, marked by each other's teeth.

"An indirect kiss. Back then—My heart was pounding too, just like now."

After finishing her chocolate banana, Mitsuki admitted shyly.

"...D-Didn't we do this all the time?"

Feeling blood rise to my face, I asked. Eating each other's food was very commonplace for the two of us. That was why I was not conscious of indirect kissing at all back then.

"A kiss during a date is special even if it was an indirect one. Well... That being said, my heart was pounding every single time. That is because I love you, Nii-san, I love you too much—I am hopelessly in love with you, Nii-san."

"Mitsuki—"

Never expecting a direct confession before I got to speak my part, my mind went blank, unable to say anything.

Seeing my reaction, Mitsuki smiled and quietly continued.

"What am I to you? Before you answer this question, Nii-san, I hope to convey to you... What kind of person you are to me, Nii-san."

After this opening statement, Mitsuki started speaking with watery eyes.

"Ever since I could remember, Nii-san—No, Y-Yuu-kun... You have been the one dearest to me. Back then, I already considered you my most beloved Yuu-kun. I had decided I would never concede you to anyone, Yuu-kun. I had already taken for granted that we would be together. There was nothing that would make me happier than this, which is

why a life without you by my side, Yuu-kun... a future without you by my side, was something I never imagined."

Calling me "Yuu-kun," Mitsuki smiled wryly at me.

"Perhaps in the beginning it was purely possessiveness. However, as I grew up, these feelings turned into true love. Futhermore... This remains true even after my childhood friend Yuu-kun turned into my brother—even now, these feelings continue to swell in my heart the whole time."

Voicing her feelings as though wringing out her words, Mitsuki placed her hand on my chest.

"I love you, Nii-san. To me, you are more important than anyone and anything. Then what about you... Nii-san?"

Expressing her feelings of deepest love, Mitsuki asked me.

"I—My feelings... are probably different from yours, Mitsuki."

Gazing into Mitsuki's eyes, I organized what I was going to say.

"Back then, I really was just a stupid kid. Romance, love... I did not understand these things back then. When we made that promise to marry, I had not thought deeply about my own feelings either."

Listening to me, Mitsuki smiled.

"Yes... I understand. I obtained that promise from you, Nii-san, with full knowledge of that. Although I was still young at the time... I am a girl, after all."

"—Girls are such amazing creatures."

"No, I simply did it unilaterally."

Mitsuki answered my emphatic comment in a tone of self-deprecation.

"Sure enough, Nii-san, what you feel for Iris-san is..."

"Yes, I love Iris. It was that time with her that I understood for the first time what romance was."

"Is that so..."

Mitsuki lowered her face, but I was not finished.

"However, at the time, I didn't know Iris' feelings—And before I figured out my own feelings, Tia came to the school. I jumped in surprise when she suddenly wanted to marry me... But Tia's feelings of admiration and devotion towards me did make me happy. I want to do a good job protecting her."

"Huh?"

Mitsuki looked up in surprise.

"This wish to protect is also the same as when I fancied Firill after that. Always making bold moves, Firill frequently surprised me. After pretending to be a couple for the school festival, Lisa and I came to understand each other. I definitely find Ren, who calls me

'Onii-chan,' very cute and I find it impossible to leave Ariella alone when she has been trying so hard on her own all along."

"Excuse me... Nii-san?"

Mitsuki looked at me questioningly and I continued.

"I must bring happiness to Shion. I am very grateful to Jeanne for continuing to help me even after I left the team. As her former captain, I am responsible for looking after her. Although Kili has many issues—Ultimately, I still can't bring myself to hate her."

At that point, I paused and placed my hand on Mitsuki's shoulder.

"Although these feelings are different from what I feel towards Iris... I still love everyone. These feelings—They absolutely do not lose to romantic feelings."

"Ah yes... I fully comprehend your wish to cherish all of us, Nii-san. That is presumably why you selected us... But the answer I seek is—"

With an anxious expression, Mitsuki looked up at my face.

"Yes, I've no intention of changing the subject. Even without choosing, I will decide properly who is dearest to me."

To dispel Mitsuki's unease, I told her firmly.

"In that case—Nii-san, please hurry and tell me. Since Iris-san is the only one you towards whom you harbor romantic feelings, the answer is already evident..."

Mitsuki urged me with an expression of resolve.

However, I shook my head.

What flashed through my mind was my first kiss—My kiss of engagement with Mitsuki that we shared on that observation platform on the mountain.

"No, Iris is not the only one I love. It's just that I failed to realize during childhood—These feelings had already existed in my heart all the way back then."

I pressed my hand tightly against my left chest and declared.

"Now that I understand what love is, I know. You are my first love—Mitsuki."

"...!?"

Mitsuki gasped and widened her eyes.

"No matter how oblivious, I was going to realize it eventually as long as we lived together. However, I was taken away by NIFL... Without noticing my own feelings, I was separated from you for three years, Mitsuki."

It was originally a decision I had made, but three years were very long. This amount of time was enough to muddle my unknown and undefined feelings.

"Due to the deal I made to defeat Leviathan, gaps appeared in my memories with you, Mitsuki... I became unable to recall my feelings for you from the past. So, to be honest—I never noticed this until I thought carefully in order to answer your question."

Enduring the pain in my heart, I conveyed this to Mitsuki.

During my period of memory loss, I fell in love with Iris. At the same time, "my true self" was tormented by the matter of whether I loved Mitsuki. When Tia helped me restore my memories, it was fortunate that the continuity of the personality of Mononobe Yuu remained unbroken—However, due to losing memories, I had definitely lost sight of my own feelings as well.

"B-But Nii-san—Even if that were the case, your love for me was only during childhood, was it not? Currently, the one you love is Iris-san... Hence, the person dearest to you is—"

"Feelings can't possibly vanish so simply."

I converted the pain in my heart to words and interrupted Mitsuki.

"Eh...?"

"I treasure you very much, Mitsuki. Because you are my childhood friend... Not because you are my little sister. I treasure you because I love you. I will never think of you as unimportant, Mitsuki, and my feelings of love for you will never go away. I think this will never change from now on."

These feelings had taken root in my childhood and were cultivated over a very long period of time. The entirety of my feelings for Mitsuki had turned into a foundation for unconditional "love." Hence, the fact that Mitsuki was dearest to me, as well as the fact that I harbored feelings of love for her—These two were infinitely interchangeable.

"In other words, Nii-san... You still love me, even now? So your first love has not ended—"

"That's right."

"...Th-This—makes me overjoyed. However... Nii-san, you are not planning to say that Iris-san and I are the ones you hold dearest, by any chance?"

Mitsuki showed disbelief and she asked me in a trembling voice.

Feeling the pain carve deeper and deeper in my heart, I smiled gravely at her.

My love for Iris and Mitsuki was all real. I did not want to choose one and abandon the other. My inability to relinquish my love for either of them made it impossible to answer. It was also very difficult for me to rank my love for Iris and Mitsuki against my feelings to cherish Tia and the other girls.

However—

"If you ask me who I love the most... I might tell you that I don't want to compare. However, I will give you a proper answer as to who is dearest to me. I believe that this should be decided by the size of feelings rather than their strength."

My words, carefully chosen, made Mitsuki frown.

The sun had set completely. Clear moonlight was illuminating the surroundings in the place of the rays from sunset.

"Size...?"

"For any person, the most important is surely themselves. Even so, we are still able to cherish others, probably because we see them as a part of ourselves. So, the person that occupies the most within oneself—the one who occupies the largest part of me—would be the one I hold dearest."

I explained my definition of "dearest person."

During my time in the special forces team of Sleipnir, I had personally witnessed the atrocities of human nature. Everyone was fighting for themselves. No one would fight for a complete stranger who had no relation to them.

However, for the sake of shared nationality, shared religion, clan members, family, friends—For the sake of people with ties to themselves, many people were willing to fight with their lives on the line.

Still, this should not be called altruism. Because what they were protecting were not others but something akin to part of their own being.

"The one who occupies the largest part of you, Nii-san..."

As Mitsuki repeated my words, her eyes wavered.

"That's right. If you look at it that way—Then only one answer is left."

I nodded at Mitsuki and gazed directly into her eyes.

The human known as Mononobe Yuu was constituted by Mononobe Mitsuki.

Ever since my earliest memories, she had been by my side. We had always played together. At night, I frequently played the word game*shiritori* with Mitsuki until late at night across our bedroom windows that faced each other.

At the moment of the engagement kiss, I had believed that Mitsuki and I would marry in the future without questioning it. Even without understanding love, from that point onwards, I already treated Mitsuki as someone who would stay by my side for a lifetime—I treated her as a part of myself.

And when Mitsuki became my sister, my undefined vision of the future turned into palpable determination.

Even at the cost of death, I wanted to protect Mitsuki and support her.

Due to this immature resolve, I stepped forward when my hometown was ravaged by Hekatonkheir and made the promise that I would protect the place Mitsuki cherished most, no matter the cost.

As a result, the two of us were separated. Although many things happened over three years, the fact of *how I came to be* remained unchanged.

I existed for the sake of Mitsuki.

Even after falling in love with another person, even with additional responsibilities to shoulder, this fundamental fact remained unmovable.

Hence—

"You are the one dearest to me, Mitsuki."

Tears slowly seeped out from Mitsuki's eyes.

During our conversation, the time for the fireworks show had arrived without us noticing. With a thunderous boom, flowers of fire bloomed in the dark sky.

Although I had promised to watch the fireworks with everyone together, it looked like we were going to be a bit late.

"I am ranked first... Is that really alright?"

"Yes, it's been the case from the very beginning. Henceforth—probably until death—This will never change."

Although I could not explain the reason properly, I still asserted with confidence.

"In your heart, Nii-san, I am the one you hold dearest..."

Astounded, Mitsuki whispered. The flames erupting in the sky added all shades of color to the side of Mitsuki's face.

"Dearest... Dearest... Really? ...Why.....? ...Eh, I... know the reason..."

I waited for Mitsuki to calm down, but she began to behave strangely.

"...Reason... Reason... Is there, a reason...?"

Next, Mitsuki's eyes lost focus. Her face blank, she began to murmur intermittently.

"Hey, Mitsuki?"

Although I questioned, Mitsuki continued to speak as though in a dream.

"I know... definitely now—but where... what was it..."

"Mitsuki!"

I grabbed her shoulders and called her name loudly. Startled, Mitsuki looked up at me, her whole body trembling.

"Oh—"

A tear streamed down from Mitsuki's eye while her body froze.

"Yes—I see now. That day, Vritra... Why would I forget...? —!"

Her expression gone tense, Mitsuki shook off my hands forcefully.

She took a few steps back as though escaping then placed her hand on the back of neck, the location of her dragon mark.

"Mitsuki...? Are you having a fever again?"

Unable to understand the situation, I leaned towards Mitsuki who seemed to be in great pain. However, Mitsuki called out harshly to stop me.

"Please stay back!"

"Stay back—Why?"

Stopped by Mitsuki's fierce vigor, I asked in my confusion.

"I... To Nii-san, I am actually just someone completely worthless."

With abject despair surfacing on her face, Mitsuki answered me in a whisper.

"What are you talking about? Didn't I tell you? You are the one dearest to me, Mitsuki!"

"These feelings—are false. Because...!?"

Mitsuki asserted firmly then suddenly moaned in pain and collapsed on the beach.

Seeing that her right hand, which had left her neck in order to support herself, turning black in color, I took a deep breath.

"Mitsuki!"

About to rush to Mitsuki straight away, I was stopped again.

"Do not touch that girl!"

Standing on the breakwater, Vritra appeared in my view as I looked back in surprise.

Vritra jumped down to the beach from the breakwater directly and approached me with a solemn expression.

"Although Neun's authority remains hitherto unclear, 'tis evident it is insufficient to suppress the ninth dragon completely."

"Vritra? What are you talking about—"

"...Dost thou not know? Nay, it should not be so. Thou art the one who had sealed the ninth calamity into this girl's body—Thou must have encountered this 'darkness' before."

Pointing at the dark substance taking over Mitsuki's right hand, Vritra pointed out sharply.

Darkness... The deep darkness devouring Mitsuki—

A chill ran along my spine.

This was my most painful memory.

Along the way to a camping trip with Mitsuki's family, we were caught in a traffic accident.

I suddenly could not see anything. Neither did I know where I was. Inside darkness, I desperately searched for Mitsuki's whereabouts.

"See—This darkness will devour everything, spreading and expanding. Thou shalt encounter danger if thou wert to touch it recklessly. After all, that girl is probably Neun like thee now."

Just as Vritra pointed out, the darkness spilling out from Mitsuki's right hand was starting to spread to the beach.

Invaded by the darkness, the sand lost its texture, producing an illusion that it had become a bottomless pit.

"I have seen this darkness previously. 'Tis likely shareth the same nature as the seventh calamity that had destroyed the world in the past. Kiskanu called these fragments of Hell—'end matter.'"

"End matter...?"

I repeated those words hoarsely and Vritra took a deep nod.

"'Tis something diametrically opposed to dark matter which embodies all possibility. That was what Kiskanu said."

"What will happen to Mitsuki at this rate?"

Still unable to fully understand Vritra, I asked the question that concerned me most.

"She will be devoured by the spreading darkness, rendered unrecognizable. In other words, she will disappear."

The instant I heard that, I sprang into action without hesitation.

I ran towards Mitsuki, who had collapsed in pain, and held her in my arms.

Mitsuki's body was giving off heat. The dragon mark on her neck was glowing blue.

"N-Nii-san...?"

With a feeble expression, Mitsuki looked at me.

"Don't worry, I'm here."

I firmly held Mitsuki's hand that had turned back. Although Vritra frantically called me to stop from behind, I absolutely refused to let go.

The darkness began spreading to my hand. However, I continued to hold Mitsuki's hand tightly with reckless abandon.

I did not care even if this darkness would devour me.

After the traffic accident, I had woken up in darkness. I could see neither myself nor Mitsuki. Although I reached out and touched Mitsuki's hand, in my state of extreme exhaustion, I did not know if she was still alive.

As a result, I started to imagine—I imagined Mitsuki as she was normally. Inside the darkness, I recalled my memories as hard as I could, doing all I could to trace out that unforgettable image of Mitsuki with a lively smile.

Then after I did that, a beam of light streamed in and I—

"!?"

The dragon mark on my left hand suddenly heated up.

As though responding to Mitsuki's dragon mark, blue-white light flooded out from within. This excessively blinding light forced me to close my eyes.

"This is..."

At the same time, I heard Vritra's surprised voice.

Opening my eyes slightly to check the situation, I discovered that the darkness invading my body was starting to be erased by the light.

Mitsuki's face, distorted by pain, was gradually relaxing. As the darkness disappeared, the light from the dragon mark also subsided.

Having lost consciousness, Mitsuki rested against me limply.

Although I did not understand what had happened, I was relieved that a crisis had been averted. However, Vritra called out to me sharply.

"'Tis not over yet! Beware of the sand!"

I instantly looked down. The darkness that had spread to the beach was shrinking into something like a pond.

"!?"

Seeing bubbles appear on its surface, I held Mitsuki in my arms and hastily jumped back.

The darkness on the beach turned intensely turbulent. It looked like something was crawling out of the pit of darkness—This pure blackness, even darker than the night sky after the sun had set, extended towards the sky where even the fireworks could not illuminate. It split into two and coalesced into humanoid forms.

Standing before me were two shadows with exceedingly clear outlines.

Hence, I was able to see. Despite the black color painted all over, I could still make out hairstyles and clothing.

One of them was a well-built man. The other was a slender woman with very long hair.

Tied with a big ribbon, the woman's long hair draped down to her waist.

"No way—"

The shadow displaying these traits stimulated my memories.

Right... I know. I began to remember.

Adults normally did not dress up this way, but it looked great on that person. Mitsuki used to tie her hair using a small ribbon of the same style—

Then those shadows over there were the two people I knew very well, who used to play with me all the time—

"Auntie Misaki... and Uncle Kazuki... Is it you?"

Those were the names of Mitsuki's parents.

The two I loved, who had lost their lives in that traffic accident—

"——"

However, the two shadows did not speak and slowly approached us.

I backed away and lowered Mitsuki to the beach. Then standing in front of Mitsuki, I stared intently at the shadows.

The shadows reached out to Mitsuki, shuffling slowly towards us. Seeing this situation, I realized Mitsuki was their target.

Were the two deceased seeking Mitsuki?

"No... They wouldn't do that."

While shifting my body and mind into a combat state, I corrected my thinking.

I—Mitsuki and I had personally witnessed their bodies. Crying at the funeral, we had bid them farewell.

Hence—*This* was not them.

Since it was not them, I must not allow Mitsuki to see these fakes.

I held my breath and ran.

At the same time, I generated dark matter, turning it into a weapon for destroying enemies.

Anti-army armament—AT Baal.

What I materialized was a gunblade for close and mid range combat, whose cutting edge was one with the barrel.

Despite being one of the pre-civilization weapons recreated using Yggdrasil's data, its true nature was designed for anti-personnel combat.

Normally, I would not be certain whether it was effective against this unidentified "darkness."

However... Now that the enemy had taken human form, the outcome would be the same regardless of weapon.

I summoned the evil dragon, "Fafnir," that had become a part of me.

By this point, I fully understood the scrapped authority of Code Lost.

It was a power to twist human destiny and guarantee death.

Although I had shared the portion beyond my control with Ariella and the other girls, this power was still greater than what I had before. So long as the opponent had human elements, it did not matter even if their true nature was a monster's.

What I interfered with was causality itself.

Hence, starting from the moment I decided to kill them, the destruction of the shadows was already ascertained.

A silver flash ripped through the darkness.

As I stepped into the darkness and swung down the gunblade, I decapitated one of the shadows.

Next, I turned, aimed the muzzle at the other shadow and pulled the trigger.

Accompanied by the roar of gunfire, the large-caliber bullet punctured a hole in the shadow's head.

Feeling the vibration in the air, I slowly lowered the gunblade.

Next, suffering what would have been fatal wounds for humans, the two shadows collapsed on the beach—turning into dust, they vanished.

I was attacked by the pain of killing the shadows of two people whom I revered as family... But I forcibly suppressed these feelings in my heart.

"—Phew."

I exhaled the breath I had been holding and observed my surroundings.

No new shadows appeared. Lying on the beach, Mitsuki was also at peace.

"Splendid, Neun."

Vritra walked towards me.

Why had she shown up with such timing—Had she noticed something off with Mitsuki earlier? There were a mountain of things I wanted to find out.

However, I asked the most important question first.

"Is this—Over?"

"Nay, 'tis the beginning of everything."

I asked, slightly hopefully, but Vritra refuted me assertively.

"According to the late Kiskanu's prophesy—nay, his prediction... There is still time prior to the advent of the ninth dragon. 'Tis why my previously stated lack of urgency was no lie. Nevertheless... Thy transforming this girl into Neun hath accelerated the timer leading to the end times."

Vritra spoke calmly then stared intently at Mitsuki who was lying on the beach.

"It's my fault...?"

"Do not show that countenance. 'Tis too early to assert that thou wert wrong. Rather, this could be a good thing. After all, thou hast proved that Neun's authority is effective against end matter."

Saying that, Vritra turned her gaze back to me before continuing.

"Thou must have encountered early signs of the ninth calamity or a portion of it—Thereafter, thou obtained the authority of Neun. Then thou must have rescued that girl as thou didst just now. However, according to what we have seen, Code Neun is unable to erase the darkness completely—'Tis more akin to sealing or suppressing. Hence, end matter might still remain inside that girl... Or perhaps, it lurketh there intentionally."

Vritra provided her viewpoint seriously then pointed to Mitsuki.

"Be that as it may... This girl's transformation into Neun hath made it difficult to continue this lurking —It hath started to break out of its shell. This is likely the reason for the unusual changes occurring to this girl."

"Break out of its shell... Well, as long as I stay by her side, I can repeat what I just did—"

I instantly thought back to earlier.

"Verily. Thou wouldst do well to accompany the girl—Continue to watch over her. That is thy duty and probably Neun's instinct."

"...Instinct?"

Noticing a word that could not be ignored, I looked up.

"Indeed, thy obsession with that girl standeth as evidence thou knowest Neun's duty. Consequently, thy actions henceforth need only follow thy heart. As an original counterdragon, thy instinct shall choose the right path for thee."

"W-Wait a sec... I am protecting Mitsuki out of instinct? No way—"

I was about to deny on reflex, but recalling how Mitsuki had acted earlier—

With despair on her face, yelling at me that my feeling for her were fake—

"Don't tell me that you said the same to Mitsuki...?"

When I asked in a trembling voice, Vritra avoided eye contact in embarrassment.

"—Apologies. 'Tis my fault. The authority apparently made her forget this memory for a while... However, she has evidently remembered. I am responsible for her mental breakdown on this occasion."

"..."

Her earnest apology dampened my fury.

"Damn it!!!!!"

I clenched my fist tightly, digging my nails into my palm, seething with rage that I could not vent anywhere.

'You are the one dearest to me, Mitsuki.'

The answer I had given, how exactly did Mitsuki interpret it... I could not imagine.

Even I was having trouble understanding how I felt inside.

"Nii-san... Sorry."

A tiny voice reached my ear.

By the time I noticed, Mitsuki had regained consciousness. Sitting up, she gazed at me looking like she was about to cry.

"Sorry... Sorry, Nii-san—"

—Why was Mitsuki apologizing?

She probably thought that I had been hurt. She must have thought that she had hurt me.

However, the one who had been hurt the most was...

"..."

I gnashed my teeth and leaned towards Mitsuki without saying anything, embracing her tightly.

"Let me go... Nii-san. I-I—"

Mitsuki resisted but when I hugged even tighter, she finally began to cry.

"……Sorry... Sorry—"

She kept apologizing while she cried.

While I was embracing my sister's petite and delicate body, I also wondered whether I was doing this merely out of instinct—

Epilogue

"So, nothing remains...?"

Loki Jotunheim frowned after listening to his subordinate's report.

On the bridge of the battleship Naglfar, the atmosphere was unusually tense.

The ship was on its way to NIFL's branch on the American west coast where Loki was scheduled to stand before an audit committee for a hearing—However, this tension in the air was not because of that. As a mere formality, the whole affair had been smoothed over beforehand.

Despite the slight hassle, it was a simple procedure following a script to reach a predetermined outcome.

The problem was that his destination had disappeared.

"Y-Yes—All means of detection including radar has failed. The spherical unknown territory, impenetrable to electromagnetic radiation, has devoured the vicinity of the branch base... I will now display it."

Satellite imagery was shown on a monitor in the bridge.

On the vast American west coast, there was a black dot like the spilling of ink.

"Three hundred kilometers or so in diameter... A height of approximately a hundred fifty kilometers. Oh—The latest news has arrived. The same kind of unknown territory has appeared in the arctic, northern Africa as well as the Atlantic coast. There are also reports that outlines of gigantic creatures have appeared inside them—"

Hearing this, Loki narrowed his eyes.

"Gigantic creatures... Could they be new dragons?"

"Please wait a moment—I will project the images."

After saying that, the operator displayed an unusual scene on the biggest monitor.

It was very big—a pitch-black sphere hovering on top of a massive black dome.

Neither the shape of a something capable of flight nor the silhouette of an animal—However, Loki knew why it had been described as a gigantic creature.

After all, it had a *heart*.

Around the humongous heart floating in the air, a network of blood vessels were wrapped around the sphere.

The heart inside it was beating strongly, causing the blood vessels to pulse accordingly.

"Was it like this in the beginning?"

When Loki asked, his subordinate shook his head.

"No—In the beginning, there were no blood vessel-like organs..."

"Is that so? Then it would not be a surprise if flesh and bone were to grow and cover it up eventually."

Loki commented with his hand against the corner of his mouth. Then he commanded his subordinates sharply.

"Contact all reachable branches immediately! This is a dragon disaster of unprecedented magnitude. We, NIFL, are the only ones who can step up as representatives of mankind!"

Swallowed by confusion and fear, his subordinates put on tense faces as a result of Loki's orders. "Yes sir!", they replied.

Seeing their reaction, Loki took out a portable terminal from his front pocket and whispered quietly.

"—Well then, Atla, what are our chances of victory?"

Words appeared on the terminal.

'Impossible to calculate. Including the Atlantis files that have been recovered so far, there is no data regarding matching targets.'

"Hmph... Then what is closest to that thing? There must be data in those files about such gigantic creatures, right?"

This time, the answer only took a short while.

'None. However, similar data exists in the fragments of information from the Akashic Record salvaged from Yggdrasil's remains.'

"Then tell me that."

Major Loki urged but the answer was delayed.

'Using information from that rubbish tree is highly ill-advised.'

After a while, that message appeared on the screen. Reading it, Major Loki smiled wryly.

"Although I understand your attitude towards Yggdrasil, I would still like to have some data for reference at least. Private sentiments must not interfere with official business."

Then as though putting hesitation aside, the following words appeared on the screen.

'Search complete. One match. Registered Code—"Eternal Longevity" Bahamut.'

Afterword

This is Tsukasa.

Finally, *Unlimited Fafnir* has reached eleven volumes.

Since serious fighting in the plot persisted for quite a while, I was asked to put in more of a slice-of-life slant than before.

After writing scenes of everyday life for each character, I became painfully aware of how much the cast has grown.

During Volume 1, the main characters consisted of the male protagonist and his six classmates—Back then, it was my first time writing a story with many female characters. It was tough.

After that, Tia was added and new characters kept debuting. Finally, all the seats in Brynhildr Class have been filled (built on the foundation of adding three more seats). Including Yuu, there are twelve students in the class!

Growing into a big family before I knew it, it gets me really excited when I have to write classroom scenes.

In particular, I find Vritra's presence in the classroom very incredible.

According to my initial concepts, her position was a little different.

However, after seeing all her desperate efforts foiled, her operations all deviating from her intent, finally captured by Yggdrasil, the editor muttered "what a klutz."

Now that I think back, that was her turning point.

Without that comment, Vritra would never have had a chance to sit down in class with Yuu and the others nor get on this volume's cover illustration.

I am looking forward to her active performance exceeding my expectationis.

Volume 12's story is also planned to involve great upheavals. I hope to see everyone with the next volume.

Next comes acknowledgements.

Korie Riko-sensei, I've mentioned it before but thank you for drawing the adorable Vritra on the cover this time.

Jeanne in the color illustration made my heart skip a beat. Ren is very cute. Absolutely awesome.

It's all thanks to you, Korie Riko-sensei, that so many characters have come to life and the story continues to push forward strongly. I continue to look forward to working with you.

Editor in charge, Jouji-sama, thank you for your many suggestions again. I am deeply grateful.

I am overjoyed that Vritra has developed into such an outstanding character after your comment of 'what a klutz' breathed new possibilities into her.

Saburouta-sensei, who is in charge of *Fafnir*'s manga version:

Although you are no longer drawing the manga by the time I'm writing this afterword, the manga's fourth and final volume is already set to be released on March 7.

Presenting things in a style different from the anime, you drew a very impressive Basilisk battle that was full of tension. Your portrayal of the characters' inner feelings was also very deep. I think your manga is the best. Especially Mitsuki who is very cute and dignified, it's extremely awesome! Thank you for the long serialization, I am truly grateful to you.

Finally, let me express my sincere thanks to all the readers.

Well then, see you next time.

Tsukasa, March 2016

Illustrator's Afterword

I love Vritra-chan in a camisole.

Korie Riko

あとがき

キャミソールヴリトラちゃんが
お気に入りです♪